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May, 1983

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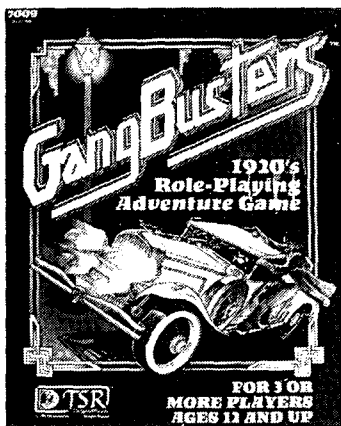
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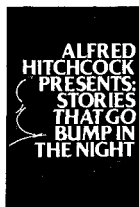
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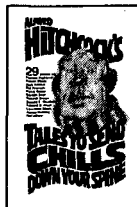
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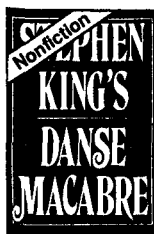
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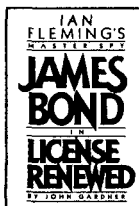
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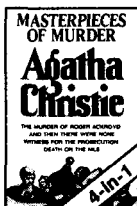
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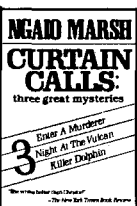
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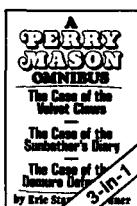
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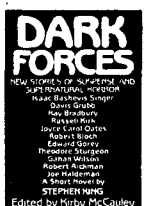
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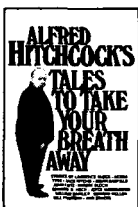
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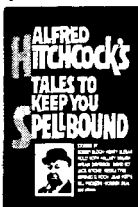
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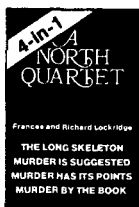
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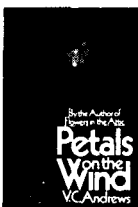
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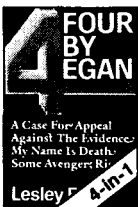
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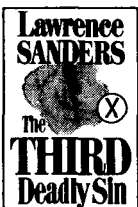
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# EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

**I**t's been almost a year now since the first Mysterious Photograph appeared in AHMM—a venture that has kept us busy here, both locating suitably mysterious candidates and opening the contest entries that come in. But those are among our favorite things to do. In the process, we've made the acquaintance of a great many works by a number of outstanding photographers, and have benefited from the help and kindness of librarians and photo agencies and museum personnel and photographers themselves, for which we are deeply grateful. And we've also made the acquaintance, on paper at least, of a great number of our readers, through the stories they've submitted and the letters that often accompany them.

Those letters and stories never fail to brighten our days and make us additionally grateful—that we are engaged in an enterprise with such *nice* readers.

And such imaginative ones. When the contest began, we didn't really know what to expect—whether, that is, it would be something people would enjoy as much as we hoped they

would, whether others would see in the photographs as much potential for entertainment of a mystery-making kind as we thought resided in them. But the responses have far exceeded our greatest expectations. Not only have there been *lots* of them, there has also been some excellent writing going on and a great variety of stories being told. The January entries, for example, included stories about Euryale, a surviving Gorgon sister of Medusa, whose countenance turned the viewer to stone; a game of swinging statues called "Pygmalion Turned Around"; a murderous gardener; a murderous sculptor; a lost jewel secreted in the folds of the statue's dress; investigations into the meaning of the spot of light on her skirt; and a statue that marched upstairs to murder its owner.

Sometimes a particular photograph elicits many stories on the same theme. The September carriage in the fog, for instance, often turned out to be a death coach, and in the November photograph, the three people standing near a potbelly stove in an el station were

often guarding a cache of diamonds hidden in the stove. But the details of plot and character are always different, and we've been continuously impressed by the amount of accomplished story telling that can get packed into two hundred and fifty words (professional writers might take note). And this from people who frequently write to say that they've never tried anything like it before.

Which leads us to the most gratifying thing of all—all those letters from contestants who have taken the time to tell us that, win or lose, they've had fun with it. Entries have come in from men and women and school students, from teenagers and senior citizens, from people who send in something nearly every month and from those inspired souls who've sent multiple entries for a single photo. And over and over again, a note thanking AHMM for the chance to do a little fiction writing, and for an entertaining means of passing an hour or so.

Well, it's we who should be

thanking the contestants instead. We've been absorbed and delighted and made to laugh (many of the stories are full of first-rate humor). And in the process we've been able to bring you, we think, some very good interpretations—and good pieces of fiction in their own right—by the winners, for everyone's enjoyment. We do want to assure all entrants, present and future, that their submissions are thoroughly appreciated, and thoroughly read. We hope they'll keep coming.

And finally, we are especially proud this month to present a full-length story by our very first contest winner, James A. Noble. (See "The Case of the Amateur Detective and the Chicken," in this issue.) It's Mr. Noble's first published story, and it came about as a direct result of the Mysterious Photograph contest. We loved it, will look forward to others from Mr. Noble, and thought you'd like to know its provenance.

And now we've got to get back to reading more entries.

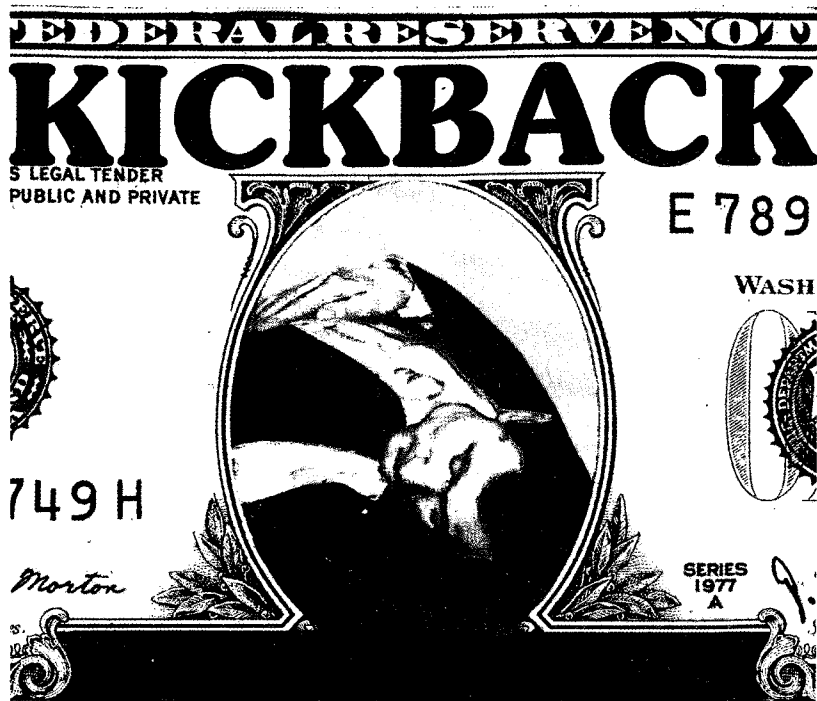
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FICTION



by Dick Stodghill

**F**or weeks now August has been behaving as expected. By mid-morning, shimmering heat waves make it appear the flatlands of Cen-

tral Indiana are submerged in some nebulous substance, close enough to reach out and touch but shying just a little farther away if you try.

Illustration by Marc Yankus

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Those not fortunate enough to spend their nights in air-conditioned bedrooms toss fitfully between sweat-soaked sheets. Each succeeding day finds tempers growing a little shorter. When keeping cool becomes a luxury, domestic killings and murder among acquaintances flare in neighborhoods unaccustomed to luxury. There the heat truly is murderous.

So I decide to finish my drink and leave quickly when an argument erupts at the next table in the back room of Horner's Tavern. Two men and a lady friend have been consuming pitchers of beer in rapid succession, laughing in boisterous camaraderie. But suddenly one of the men has grown surly and makes threatening noises. The other draws back from him, saying, "Hey, I thought we were friends."

The angry one bangs his mug down on the table. "That was two pitchers ago."

Stifling a chuckle, I take my empty glass and walk out front, find an empty stool at the bar and climb aboard. Too late I discover it is next to one occupied by Clint Mawby. He makes me aware of my mistake with his usual sarcasm. "What an unexpected pleasure," he says. "Joined by a fellow denizen of the fourth estate, that noted purveyor of daily inspiration in 'Around Town with Hal Blinn.'

Tell me, Hal, how often do you get around any part of town beyond staggering distance of your squalid pad in the Delaware Hotel?"

I ignore the question and mumble an unenthusiastic, "Hello, Clint." Unless I make a fast escape, I'm in for another of his harangues. They grow more biting with every swallow of Cutty Sark.

Mawby is a one-man newspaper, publisher of a vitriolic tabloid that once a week attacks every custom, institution, and person of prominence in Midland. Political affiliation offers no protection from his vindictiveness, and he respects no sacred cows. Quite often I agree with what he writes, but I would never admit as much to him.

As might be expected, the daily press ranks near the top of Mawby's hate list. He singles me out as a particularly bad example because I don't load my column with the same inflammatory material that dominates his paper, *The Lens*. There are times when I do, but not too often and always subtly. A few days of his sledgehammer approach and I'd be down filing an unemployment claim. Of course, he thinks I'm gutless.

He switches to a friendlier tack. It's so unlike him that I grow wary when he says, "I en-



joyed your piece on the mayor's padding his staff, taking care of his old buddies. Been spending much time at City Hall lately?"

"No."

"Thought I saw you going in the controller's office the other day."

"I haven't been inside the building in a month or the controller's office in a year." After I've said it he seems relieved, so I decide he's onto something. He must have feared I might be chasing the same story. The *News-Banner* has a city hall reporter to take care of such things, but he isn't a digger.

We trade banalities awhile in unfamiliar cordiality, then I grow weary of it and tell him I'm ready to turn in. He finishes his drink. "I'll walk out with you. Time to get back to work."

Even at ten the night air is lifeless, superheated. We exchange goodnights, and while I wait on the corner for the light to turn green, he walks west on Main toward his office, in what once was a drive-in restaurant. He hasn't gone more than fifty feet when a sharp report makes me flinch, then turn when I hear a cry of pain. Mawby is slumping to the ground, but my head pivots again as tires squeal and a car speeds away from the curb across the street. I see only the rear, but it's enough to tell it's a late-model Buick sedan.

The driver is alone. The lights aren't on so I can't read the license plate.

I yank open the door of Horner's and yell for someone to call the police and an ambulance. When I get to Mawby, he is writhing on the sidewalk, clutching his left shoulder and moaning softly. The front of his shirt is soaked with blood, so I can't pinpoint the wound. I try to reassure him, tell him help is coming, and at that instant a siren blares as a county ambulance leaves its garage three blocks away. The crowd from Horner's has emptied out onto the sidewalk and gathered round us. A police car glides to a stop, silent but with lights flashing.

Mawby raises his head a few inches, stares at me from panicky eyes, takes hold of my arm with wet fingers, and squeezes hard. "My story," he says in a croaky whisper. "I've got to write my story. Durkee's kickbacks and—" Then he realizes what he's saying and who's listening. No one else can hear and I move aside for two paramedics, who tend him with speedy proficiency.

When I straighten up, someone hands me a towel to wipe my arm. People ask questions but I ignore them, trying to think about Mawby's words. There is no time, though. As the ambulance pulls away, I am

hustled into the back seat of the police car. I tell what I know to a man in uniform, then repeat it to two detectives, but I leave out what Mawby said. There hasn't been time to think it through, and the short ride to the police station doesn't provide any. When I leave an hour later, after signing a written statement, I'm still the only one who knows.

The station in City Hall is across the street and less than a block from the Delaware, where I have a drink to settle me down. Then I climb the stairs to my third floor rooms to try to make some sense of the whirlwind events. Of course, "Durkee's kickbacks" are at the center of my thoughts.

Walt Durkee is the city engineer. The job entails a multitude of responsibilities, and some aren't clear to me. Maintenance of streets and city property is the big thing. Along with the city attorney and the controller, the engineer sits on the Board of Public Works and Safety. It runs in my mind that Durkee also has something to do with the Board of Sanitary Commissioners, which reminds me of a favorite saying of city editor Jake Richards: "If you're wanting corruption, get into sewers. You can flush away the evidence, or bury it."

Durkee is a gangly man, about six four, one of those people who

seem all arms and legs and whose clothes hang like gunny sacks. He's more of a politician than an engineer and has fed at the public trough for at least half his fifty years. Like most of that breed, he's friendly enough, works one side of the political street vigorously but keeps as many doors open as possible on the other, and does about six bits' worth of work for every dollar in his paycheck. He has always impressed me as okay as long as you keep in mind the kind of person you're dealing with.

Backtrailing Mawby shouldn't be hard, but I'm confused about ethics. Do his words constitute a legitimate lead, or would following up on them be taking advantage of a man when he's down? It would be easy if he dies, but I push aside that line of thinking. There also is the question of whether the police should be told. Probably, and positively if they prove to be his final words. But I'm back to that again so I decide to sleep on it.

The phone jars me awake at six. Steve Granger, the police reporter for the *News-Banner*, wants details of the shooting, so I repeat the story a little crankily. When he's satisfied, Granger tells me Mawby is in intensive care, listed as critical. "That doesn't mean much," he says. "Everybody in intensive

care is considered critical."

"No visitors, right?"

"Just family. He was hit just below the left shoulder. An inch lower and the only visitors would have been at the mortuary."

Trying to get back to sleep doesn't work out. It's too hot, the sheets are sticky, my mind's in gear. I choke on the first acrid taste of cigarette, then walk to the open window next to one with an ancient air conditioner that's so noisy it hasn't been turned on in five years. Downtown is shrouded by a dirty-dishwater haze. A gunman lurks somewhere out there under it, but when the sun burns the mist away, he'll still be hidden. Finding him is police business, but I decide that doesn't entitle the police to know what story a newsman is working on. Maybe it's the wrong decision, but I've made it.

**F**rom seven thirty to nine every weekday morning, a large round table near the entrance to the hotel dining room is occupied by city officials. When one leaves, it isn't long before another shows up to take his place. With them every morning is Bert Simon, city hall reporter for the *News-Banner*. He's had the beat ten years and knows it like a cabby knows the city streets. That doesn't offset the fact that he's

too cosy with his sources. He's considered one of the boys, which means he settles for handout material. He never asks probing questions unless ordered to by Jake Richards. Of course, Jake knows Simon is in the administration's pocket. His attempts to switch Simon to another beat have always failed, though, because Simon has always gone over his head to ward them off. When Clint Mawby exposes some wrongdoing in *The Lens*, Simon shrugs it off as unsubstantiated. If it does prove otherwise, if the story becomes a nine-day wonder, Simon pursues it relentlessly and reports details even Mawby missed.

I watch from my favorite table in the corner until the gathering is about to break up, then catch Simon's eye and nod for him to come over. He ambles across the room and slumps down in the chair beside me. "What's the good word, Hal? Heard you had a little excitement last night."

I grind out a cigarette and nod. "Mawby got under somebody's skin. Any idea whose?"

He chuckles. "Could be half the town. Mawby's always had plenty of enemies."

"I hear he's been spending lots of time at City Hall lately."

"No more than usual. He always spends a lot of time at the Hall."

"Anything out of the ordinary going on there?"

Simon's bovine expression of innocence doesn't change. Either he's the least curious reporter I've ever encountered or he's a shrewd actor who knows it sometimes pays to keep your eyes averted. "Nothing, Hal," he says. "Not a thing. Just the usual hot weather routine. No one doing a thing they don't have to."

He takes an antique gold watch from a pocket of the vest he refuses to discard despite the heat, flips open the cover, and pushes back his chair. "Gotta go, ol' buddy. The Board of Works is ready to meet."

I drop a quarter under my saucer and say, "I'll tag along."

The Board of Works meets every Wednesday morning in the old city courtroom on the third floor. A cheerless room with too much dark mahogany and dingy yellow walls. Formality is acceptable only in small helpings in a Hoosier city of eighty thousand, so I am greeted with remarks that aren't very funny but call for a grin in response. Eddie Lang, the feisty little city attorney, assumes a look of mock apprehension and says, "Oh-oh, boys, hide the good stuff. That keyhole columnist just walked in."

Walt Durkee quits shuffling papers and glances along the table. "Where's the agenda?

Must be something big on tap to get Blinn down here."

Even Sam Whitlow, the less affable city controller, pitches in with, "To what do we owe this honor, Hal?"

I reply in kind, as expected, then look around. A dozen spectators have seated themselves as far from each other as possible. Half are regulars at any public meeting. A watchdog from the League of Women Voters, pen poised above a yellow legal pad on her lap, catches my eye and waves.

Like most governmental meetings, this one is a study in boredom. Maybe that's the idea, make them so dull a citizen seldom comes back for a second dose. When the merciful end finally arrives, I start making the rounds of the offices.

I'm acquainted with many of the people at the Hall but have few intimates. *The Morning Sun* mentioned that I witnessed the shooting, so everyone asks for the gory details. A few are genuinely shocked. Most fake it, betrayed by the glint of excitement in their eyes. It's an ideal door-opener, an excuse for me to ask questions about Mawby without raising the subject myself.

It doesn't lead to anything, though, until I run into Min Stivey on her way to a coffee break. I offer to buy and lead her to a small hole in the wall

place around the corner on Mulberry, then to a secluded booth. Min is one of the party faithful who drift from office to office, from City Hall to the courthouse and back again, depending on who holds office at any given time. An angelic face hides a satanic mind. She knows everything about everybody and is always willing to deny them the benefit of the doubt. Angelically, of course.

She devours every detail of the shooting, which I embellish in the telling. A few of the embellishments are prefaced with, "I haven't told this to anyone, but . . ." Min reacts with feigned horror, straining toward me to get every word on the recorder whirring in her mind. Later it will be edited and further embellished.

Then I switch tactics, become the bumbling outsider lost in the intricacies of city government. A bewildered guy searching for a helping hand, knowing Min's is reaching out. Knowing, too, that she believes most of what she tells me won't be remembered or even comprehended. Without the Min Stiveys of the world, a newsman's life would be much harder.

I lead her through a few decoy questions, then say, "Mawby was spending a lot of time at City Hall lately. I've been wondering why, but nobody seems to know."

Min makes a sniffing sound. "That's not hard to figure out. He and Luella Rachline have a thing going."

"Who?"

"Luella Rachline in the controller's office. That gawky bookkeeper with the thick ankles and droopy eyes. A real sweet kid."

"But Mawby's married."

Min smiles pityingly. "Oh, Hal. So is Luella, but when did that ever stop certain people? Take it from me, they're a hot item."

"You mean really . . ."

"I mean really."

I mull it over on the walk back to City Hall, three stories of art deco in ivory-toned brick. People have been saying for years that Clint Mawby gets many of his stories in bed. It could be, so I head for the controller's office. Luella Rachline must have been waiting for me because she comes from behind the counter when I walk in and leads me down a hall to a cubbyhole stockroom.

After shutting the door she leans back against it, both hands behind her. There's a sick look in her eyes but they don't droop and she must have had her ankles fixed since Min last saw her. She asks, "Have you heard any news about Clint?"

I repeat what Granger told me, then answer her questions about the shooting. "Was he



conscious?" she asks. "Did he say anything?"

"He told me he was working on a story about kickbacks involving Walt Durkee. I think he wanted me to follow up on it, but the ambulance crew interrupted us before he could finish. That's why I came to see you. I understand you and Clint are close."

Her face reddens a little, but she doesn't say anything. "I think he'd want you to fill me in on what's going on."

She shakes her head. "I don't. That wouldn't be like Clint."

I give her one more chance. "If the story doesn't come out, whoever shot him may try again."

Her head keeps shaking. "Unless Clint tells me . . ."

Fat chance, I think. But without meaning to, she's confirmed that I'm on the right track.

A couple of tedious hours sifting through contracts, purchase orders, payment vouchers, and whatever other records I lay hands on makes me wonder if I wouldn't have been better off in some other part of town when Mawby was shot. Then something looks familiar and I backtrack until I find it again in slightly different form. Suddenly the first step is clear, the one that opened the door to the kickbacks.

Under Indiana law, any purchase or project costing fifteen

thousand dollars or more must be put out for bids. Certain department heads, in this case the city engineer, can award purchases or contracts for minor jobs without going through that lengthy procedure. Otherwise even fewer potholes would get filled than is the case, which is few enough.

So certain local firms or contractors supply goods or services that may not amount to much individually but can add up to a hefty sum over a year's time. If it's handled at all fairly, there's nothing wrong with the system because it keeps things moving. But when contracts for the same project are awarded piecemeal, it's obvious someone is out to circumvent the law. In the case I've come across, Walt Durkee contracted with Bessemer Construction Company to repair a bridge in three stages, each costing fourteen thousand nine hundred and fifty dollars. Joe Bessemer's outfit had repaired the east end, then the middle, then the west.

A little additional digging reveals more of the same on street projects, all involving Bessemer. I haven't covered everything when I quit after writing down sixteen jobs totaling two hundred and four thousand dollars. It doesn't prove kickbacks were involved, but you'd have to be pretty naive to believe otherwise.

A rumble from within tells me lunchtime has come and gone, so I walk to Horner's for a bowl of spicy chili and a beer. Then I cross the street to the *News-Banner* and hack out a quick column. A real potboiler using whatever material came in the mail along with a few comments on the heat. Granger wanders in while I'm at it and tells me Mawby's condition is stable. His wife and a high school kid who helps him at times have finished the job of pasting up pages, so *The Lens* will appear on schedule.

That makes me wonder if Mawby intended to write the kickback story last night and run it this week. Or was it still incomplete? I go back to Horner's to try to think everything through, wishing for once that Grady Driscoll was around rather than off somewhere on vacation. Just like him, I think to myself, to leave town right at the time I need a colleague willing and able to kick ideas back and forth across the table. His shoot-from-the-hip attitude can be annoying, but we have a knack for clearing each other's heads.

Jake Richards is at the bar when I walk in so I tap him on the shoulder and say, "I need to talk, Jake. Come on in back and I'll buy you a beer."

He turns and looks at me from watery, red-streaked eyes.

"Dammit, Hal, I don't want another beer. It's time to go home and fix supper."

"Come on, Jake, it's important."

He sighs long and piteously, but eases the skinny body that has seen sixty-two years' hard service off the stool, clutches the small of his back and groans, then follows along, muttering under his breath. When we are settled, he glances around the empty tabletop and says, "Well, where the hell's the beer?"

I go back out front and get a couple, then tell him the whole story, including the questions in my mind. He frowns now and then, shakes his head a few times, gives an exasperated snort every so often. When I finish, he says, "My God, but you've got a muddled brain."

"In what way?"

"First, Mawby himself gave away what he's working on, so that puts it up for grabs. Second, he was going to write it last night so it would have been in *The Lens* tomorrow. That means a week's grace but we can't wait that long because somebody else might get wind of it. Third, it should be Bert Simon's story but he won't do anything with it, so you go ahead. But it's page one stuff, not column material. Fourth, it's not the business of the police to know what story a reporter is working on."

He pauses a moment, then says, "Well, in this case maybe it is their business, but let Mawby tell 'em if he wants to, which he won't."

I sit nodding my head while he empties his glass. "The kickback story is the big one, Hal, but you need proof. Talk to that woman again, whatever her name is, and get it. Without the kickback angle, the cheating on bids is drab stuff."

"Finding out who shot Mawby is secondary. If you should come up with something, tell that cop friend of yours about it, but for God's sake, try to do it on our time, not *The Morning Sun's*. As I see it, the gunman could have been Walt Durkee, that contractor Joe Bessemer, somebody one or both hired to do the job, or a party unknown who has nothing to do with the kickback story."

He stares at his empty glass almost wistfully so I reach for it, but he shakes his head and gets up. "I'm going home and fix supper. Honest to God, Hal, I can't figure out what your problem was."

Neither can I, now. Except that none of this really fits in with the way I had planned to spend the next few days. But like it or not, I'm stuck with it. And Jake was wrong, Greg Staley is Driscoll's cop friend. I just know him.

By chance I run into him

when I stop in the Backstage Bar on the way to the hotel for dinner. "You're not working on the Mawby shooting, are you?" I ask him.

"No, Hanley and Caproletti are on it. Did you know they found the car? An '81 Buick stolen from a factory parking lot, then returned before the owner got off work at midnight. He reported it anyway because he knew somebody had driven it. The seat was closer to the wheel than he keeps it, and he had filled the tank and set the trip odometer on his way to the plant, but instead of one mile it had gone seven."

"Sounds like it was a spotted car, one a pro had on his list for safe use during a given time."

"Right, but from what I've heard it wasn't a professional job. The guy was too quick on the trigger. A pro would have taken his time and done it right, and he would have used a silencer. The whole thing was amateurish, aside from using a safe car."

So scratch the idea of a hired killer. Unless Durkee or Joe Bessemer found a dumb one or talked a friend into doing the job, which isn't likely.

**D**uring dinner I try to think of a way to talk to Luella Rachline again without waiting till morning. I give up on it

after deciding I can't very well knock on the door while she and her husband are watching TV and say I want to discuss the affair she's having with Clint Mawby. But it does give me a tool to apply a little pressure with.

After coffee, I walk back to the paper and into the library. The file on Durkee is bulky and I skim over it quickly. Bessemer's is light. All stuff related to business and most of it about his activities in a contractors' organization and the East Side Kiwanis Club.

The Rachlines' is even skimpier, just a pair of clips. One tells of her being named a party secretary two years ago. The other is an announcement of her husband Clifford's being promoted to production superintendent at Clay Brothers International, a transmission plant at the east end of town and Midland's largest industry. That one's dated 1977.

I cross the hall to the newsroom, eerie in its nighttime loneliness. Beyond the wall *The Morning Sun* crew is in high gear. That only adds to my feeling of being in a mausoleum. After a couple of puffs on a cigarette I grind it out, dissatisfied but without a cure in mind. A few lethargic moments pass, then I get out the phone book and jot down four numbers. No one answers at any of them. I

didn't have a real plan, was just going to wing it, so I don't care because at least I tried.

Gusts of wind are scattering debris when I leave the building, stinging my eyes with particles too small to see but big enough to feel. An empty beer can clatters along the sidewalk. The air carries the scent of a prairie storm, and as I turn west onto Main, the horizon flashes yellow and white and thunder rumbles in the distance.

I lean into the blow and quicken my pace. When I get to the corner, the lights are on in the old drive-in that now is *The Lens*. Mawby's wife, or a woman I assume is his wife, bends over a desk in the second window.

I bang my fist against the metal door, get no response, so keep at it until it swings back abruptly and the woman stands scowling out at me. She's big, both in stature and because she's carrying twenty pounds too many. Her sandy hair is tousled, her print house dress dusty and wrinkled. Yet an animal attractiveness emanates from her, hard to define but magnetic. Even her impatient scowl and harsh "Yes?" don't diminish it.

I'm not sure why I've come, so I hesitate. While I'm trying to frame some lame excuse, her features relax and she says, "You're Hal Blinn. I know you

from your picture. Ought to, it's in the *Banner* every day." She steps aside and motions me in.

I follow her through a small outer office and into another that's not much bigger and is amazingly cluttered. I don't have to be told it's the one where her husband does his writing. Beyond it is a large room with upright racks for pasting up pages, tall stacks of back issues of *The Lens*, and library tables piled high with tools of the trade and plain junk. Among other things, Clint Mawby is a pack rat.

She pours two cups of coffee from an urn and hands me one without asking. She sips from the other, eyeing me all the while.

"Well?"

"Any news of your husband, Mrs. Mawby?"

"He'll live. And the name's Fern. Now, what's really on your mind?"

I grin a little. "Maybe I just wanted to be neighborly, Fern. See if everything's going okay."

"Maybe pigs fly after dark."

"Not a Hoosier, are you? New York? New England?"

"Try New Jersey. Sniffing around after the story Clint was working on, aren't you? Don't try to con me into believing otherwise; my dad was a reporter so I've been around your kind all my life. Sorry, but I can't help. The white knight in dirty linen doesn't let me in

on his escapades, business or personal."

"I don't really know Clint very well, but I learned a few things today."

She looks at the window, where the first big drops of rain splatter against the glass. She's tough, but not as tough as she pretends to be. Something more than the shooting is bothering her. I have an idea she needs somebody to talk to but I would bet there aren't many of that kind in her life. I'm not much help when it comes to that, but I say, "Problems, huh?"

"Everybody's got 'em," she says, shrugging. Then she smiles at me, a warm smile tinged with hurt. "Relax, Hal, I'm not going to unload my troubles. Clint's just Clint. Getting shot isn't going to change that. He could have been a good newspaperman, a good man in general, if he didn't have this constant need to prove something to himself."

"Maybe it's that way with all crusaders."

"And philanderers."

"So you know about that?"

"I've always known, every time. I quit caring a long time back. It's just been a silent, unspoken part of our lives until last week. Then there was a phone call and, to coin a fresh new phrase, it was the last straw."

"A call tipping you off?"



"Uh-huh. One of those 'You don't know me but . . . ' calls. Anonymous, of course. Having her put it into words woke me up, though. I just decided that's it." She laughs without warning and, in a cheerier tone, says, "Hey, I said I wasn't going to tell you my troubles. Really, now, did you have something in mind when you came down here?"

I shake my head. "Look, if you'd like a drink . . ."

She runs a hand across her hair, looks down at herself, and shakes her head, too. "Thanks, but not tonight. Now if you ask again in a few days . . ."

I tell her I will, and when I'm back on the street again, realize I meant it. The rain didn't amount to much but left even more humidity in its wake. I try a couple of the phone numbers again when I get to the newsroom, still get no answer and decide to call it a night. On the way to the hotel I wonder how much real trouble is caused by the Min Stivey types.

**I**'m waiting when Luella Rachline walks into the lobby at City Hall in the morning. I fall into step beside her, tell her I think we'd better have a cup of coffee, and am a little surprised when she agrees without argument. We start for the hole in the wall on Mulberry, but I change my mind

and lead her to the hotel so we can have more privacy.

The time has passed for the gentle approach, which didn't work anyway, so when the waitress leaves I get right to it. I tell her I have the kickback story worked out and she has three choices: tell me what she knows, tell the police and prosecutor, or find herself playing a major role in a coverup story.

She surprises me a second time by saying, "I'd already decided to tell you if you came back again."

"Smart idea. Go right ahead."

"You know where the engineer's office is and those two little storerooms just to the north of it?"

"I don't recall the storerooms, but go on."

"Well, the engineer uses one of them but the controller's office keeps old records stored in the other. I think they used to be part of the same office because there was a window or just an open space connecting them and it's been covered with plywood. It doesn't fit tightly any more, so you can see part of the other room from the controller's side. I was looking for something up there one day when Walt Durkee and Joe Bessemer went into the other room."

"How did you know it was them?"

Lowering her eyes, she

blushes and says, "I peeked. I was quiet, so they didn't know I was there. They talked about different jobs and Durkee told Bessemer he would get a couple of good ones that are coming up. Then Bessemer handed him an envelope and said, 'Here's the rest of your twenty for Elm Street.'

"I thought he meant twenty dollars but Durkee opened the envelope and took out a thick bundle of large bills. Then I realized what was going on. Bessemer had meant twenty percent. So I told Clint. He did a lot of checking and the story was going to be in *The Lens* today."

Even using *my* arithmetic it doesn't take long to figure that twenty percent of two hundred and four thousand means more than forty thousand dollars in Durkee's pocket. Tax free, and there could be more.

I ask her, "Did Durkee and Bessemer know Mawby was working on the story?"

"I don't know. Clint was digging into things for several days, though, and I know he talked to Durkee a couple of times."

"Does your husband know about you and Mawby?"

The color drains from her face. "Good heavens, no. And it's finished, I swear. He doesn't have to be told about it, does he?"

"I don't know, Luella. Who can tell where this will lead?"

"No one, I guess," she answers softly.

It's mid-afternoon by the time I finish combing the records again. This time I make sure I have everything and carry it back three years. The next step is talking to Durkee and Bessemer, if they have anything to say, but it will have to wait until late evening or early morning when the danger of *The Morning Sun's* picking up on it is past.

There won't be time to write a column so I pull one from my reserve bank and file it for tomorrow. That will make two dogs in a row, but it can't be helped. Then I go ahead and write the kickback story so all I'll have to do in the morning is add the comments of Durkee and Bessemer, or their "no comment." When it's finished, I stash it safely away.

After dinner I go upstairs and dial Durkee's home number, figuring it's too late for *The Morning Sun* to do anything. His wife answers and tells me he's at a meeting of the party central committee and won't be home till late. "That's the third night this week," she says testily.

"What were the others?" I ask, suddenly curious.

"Monday he was in Indianapolis for an engineers' meet-

ing, Tuesday he was out late at a planning commission meeting."

I thank her and dial Joe Bessemer's number. "He isn't available. Can I help you?" his wife says. I tell her who I am and ask when she expects him home. "Not until Sunday, Mr. Blinn. He's at a convention of contractors in St. Louis."

"How long has he been there?"

"He left last Sunday morning."

I make another call to verify that Durkee was at the planning commission Tuesday night, find he was there until ten thirty. Then I go downstairs to the bar and think about it over a drink. Halfway through it I walk out to the lobby and buy a *News-Banner*, read Granger's followup on the shooting again, and confirm that the car was stolen from the lot at Clay Brothers Plant One.

Then I try to remember where my own car is. When I do, I walk a couple of blocks to where I left it Tuesday afternoon, nearly fifty-five hours ago. It's there, parked next to a one-hour parking sign. Without a ticket.

**L**uella Rachline is at the central committee meeting—I have made sure of that—so her husband comes to the door after my first ring. Instead of the rangy, rug-

ged type I'm expecting, Rachline is well under six feet, weighs ~~one~~-fifty tops, combs his thinning hair carefully to cover as much area as possible, and still has a necktie on and neatly knotted at ten o'clock at night. He peers at me through wire-rimmed bifocals. The *News-Banner* trails toward the floor from his left hand and my photo stares out at me from the upper corner.

"Yes?" he says, then quickly adds, "You're Hal Blinn, aren't you?"

I tell him I am and ask if I can talk to him a minute. He leads me to a living room so neat it seems no one really lives there. I wonder where in the world I'm going to begin. For some reason, confronting this meek little man has thrown me off stride, makes me wonder if I'm making a big mistake. Again I wish Driscoll hadn't left town when he did. He's better than I am at this sort of thing. It's not my style, but I decide his blunt approach is the only one to use.

Rachline has offered me a chair a few feet from his own, so I sit on the edge and lean toward him. "Mr. Rachline, I know you shot Clint Mawby."

He blinks a couple of times, nothing more, and says, "Why do you think that?"

"Last week you got an anonymous phone call telling you

what was going on between Mawby and your wife. You probably checked it out because you don't impress me as a man who'd go off half-cocked. You felt compelled to do something, but at the same time you didn't want to upset the routine of your lifestyle.

"Then you did some further checking on Mawby, found he always works late Tuesday nights, pasting up pages to take to the printer the next day. You decided that would be the time to take your revenge. I think you planned to drive up, shoot him through the window, and then go on, but something changed your mind. Anyway, you didn't want to risk using your own car so you took one from the plant parking lot, one you knew wouldn't be missed till the shift ended."

His expression doesn't change as I spell it out for him. He quietly measures me a moment, almost smiling from one side of his mouth. At the same time he tamps tobacco into a pipe from a glass humidior on the table beside his chair. When it's filled, he searches his pockets for a match, doesn't find one, and pulls open a drawer in the table. Rather than coming out with a match, though, his hand holds a gun.

When it's only a few feet from your nose, the bore of a .38 looks awfully big. The ta-

bleau—Man with Gun and a Fool—goes on with neither sound nor movement far too long to suit me. Finally Rachline says, "I had no intention of shooting Mawby from outside the window. I was going inside to tell him who I was and just why he was going to die. That was very important to me."

"What changed your mind?"

"Circumstances. I parked down the street, which seemed the safe thing to do, planning to walk the rest of the way. When I got to the corner, though, he was locking the door, and then he came toward me. He passed no more than a foot away and even nodded to me."

Recalling it seems to upset him, so he pauses a moment. "I've never been involved in anything like this, Mr. Blinn. I was girded to go inside, but having him come out that way unnerved me, I'm afraid. I turned and watched him go into that bar across the street from where I had parked; then I went back to the car and waited. He was in there nearly an hour. Apparently I'm not cut out for this sort of thing because the longer he remained inside, the more tense I became. When he finally came out, I just picked up the gun and fired."

"Did you intend to kill your wife, too?"

He looks surprised. "No, of course not." He adds, "But now

I'm afraid you've given me no choice but to kill you."

"Don't be a sap, Rachline. I'm surprised the police haven't been here already, and you can bet they will be before much longer. Mawby's going to live, so you don't even face a murder charge."

"That isn't the important thing. Whatever the charge, my life would be over. I'm really sorry, Mr. Blinn, but I'm going to have to do it."

"Look, Rachline, under the circumstances why don't you stop calling me mister? So where do you intend to shoot me, here in your living room?"

"No, that wouldn't do at all. I think we'd better go somewhere in your car." He motions with the gun for me to walk to the door.

For a few seconds I consider just leaning back in the chair, maybe throwing him off stride again, but decide it's not such a hot idea. He's already on his feet so I get up, too, and start edging toward the door sideways, still facing him.

He really isn't good at this sort of thing. No more than a yard separates us, and the hand with the gun is extended toward me. As often as I've seen it done in the movies, I still have qualms about trying it myself, but I lash out and knock his arm down and away from me, then grab his arm with one

hand and the gun with the other. The struggle is brief and probably would be comic on the screen. Just as I wrest the gun from him, he uses his free hand to crown me with something very solid.

I drop to my knees, conscious but with an eight-martini feeling inside my head. I stay there, mouth open like a bird that found a sheet of glass in its flight path, until a car starts near by. Then I risk moving and discover it's still possible. Not comfortable, but possible. Rachline is gone, which suits me, so I look around for a phone and eventually discover it under the hand I'm using for support. Trying to remember whom I intended to call comes next. When I do, I feel quite pleased with myself and catch sight of my reflection smirking at me from a large mirror. On the third try I hit the nine-one-one buttons in the right order, then slur a few sentences into the mouthpiece.

I'm only vaguely aware of being driven back downtown in my own car and have a dim recollection of winning an argument with a policeman about going to the hospital. Once I'm seated across a desk from Greg Staley, things begin to clear a little. I look at my watch and smile because *The Morning Sun* deadline has passed.

I had insisted on talking to



Staley. In the middle of explaining everything to him we are interrupted by another detective, Caproletti. "Rachline's on his way in," he says. "He flagged down a state police car out on I-69 and gave himself up. Said he decided there was no place to run to."

Caproletti sticks around to hear the rest of my story. Every so often he and Staley look at each other and make clucking sounds about withholding evidence. But when we've finished, Staley walks me across the street to the hotel and buys a genuine martini for me.

In the morning I add two lines to my story: "unavailable for comment" for Bessemer and "no comment" for Durkee. Bert Simon writes a sidebar with comments from the mayor and a little political analysis. Granger does the story on Rachline's arrest. Jake grouches about having too much local copy to deal with, but no one is taken in. He's really beaming, it just looks like a scowl.

By evening, dull gray clouds have moved in from the west, and it has begun to cool off. I'm alone at a table in Horner's back room, debating whether to call Fern Mawby to see if she's ready for that drink, when Driscoll walks in. He's wearing

a green-striped sport shirt with matching shorts and his face is sunburned. "You look like a tomato on top of a watermelon," I tell him, but he ignores it. When he's settled with a beer and a Bushmills in front of him, he says, "Anything happen while I've been gone?"

So I tell him. He pretends it isn't very interesting, but I can tell he's mad because he missed the fun. When I finish, he yawns and says, "Probably nothing will come of it."

"Nothing come of it?" I begin ticking things off. "Mawby's in the hospital, shot. Mad, too, because he missed his big story. His wife, Fern, is filing for divorce. Walt Durkee has resigned. The grand jury convenes Tuesday to take up the kickbacks involving him and Joe Bessemer. Clifford Rachline's in jail for attempted murder. His wife Luella has quit her job, quit her position with the party, and gone into seclusion. Nothing come of it!"

I add, "Oh, yes, and Bert Simon got a note from the publisher praising his in-depth analysis in his sidebar."

Driscoll leans back in his chair and stretches noisily, then looks at his watch and yawns again. "So what else you been doin' while I was gone?"

FICTION

# Ghost on the Window Sill by Ingram Meyer



Illustration by Hank Blaustein

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**J**ake Kolbe gave the long aluminum ladder a final tuck, making sure it wouldn't slide away from under him on the already dewy grass. Then he shook back his wavy dark hair and ran his fingers through it. He straightened his tie, pulled up his longish executive socks, made sure his carefully folded and starched white handkerchief would show no more than one and a quarter inch at its highest peak from his navy blazer pocket. His Phasar quartz showed twelve thirty A.M. It was a good time to make a surprise entrance.

He started stealthily up the ladder. Hell, a business partner shouldn't have to burst into a meeting like this, a secret sneaky meeting to boot, obviously to decide Something Big behind his back. He could hear their voices, caught the odd word and fragments of sentences—"profit . . . the key to our independent future . . . attractive investment package." Jake was mad. He felt the blood rush furiously around the veins in his head and had to stop climbing. No use flying into the room in his present state. In fact, no use getting into the room right away, anyway. He quietly climbed two more rungs. He would listen first, get the gist of the business venture. He needed at least that ammunition to confront those rotten bums.

Jake started up again. He couldn't remember ever before being so bloody mad in all his thirty-two years. The gall of his partners! When he, Jake Kolbe, had come into a nice tidy sum, thanks to old Uncle Anthony's demise, he'd been good enough to be taken into the firm as partner. They had been glad enough to have the money. They had been kind—okay, fatherly even—and patiently made the bejeaned, be-T-shirted, wild-haired young slop into a charming young businessman. Oh yes, they had worked on him all right. He had even welcomed the help and advice. A hippie lifestyle at thirty had become very boring and meaningless.

And now came this! This morning—man, no! yesterday morning—he had been flirting with beautiful blonde Miss Nye, Antoinette Jean Nye, and she had given him by mistake one of the memos meant for Zimmerman, Henderson, Colbert, and McPhee—but not for him, Jake Kolbe. He had returned the memo to Miss Nye, who had instantly burst into a flood of tears. She had sobbed and pleaded with him not to let on about her silly mistake. She had begged him not to get her fired—she was supporting a sick mother and a ninety-one-year-old aunty—and . . . well, Jake had invited Miss Nye out for lunch. On the way back, a dinner dance

date for Saturday had been arranged. And what was more, Jake knew, he just *knew*, she was going to be the future Mrs. Kolbe. Maybe she, too, knew it already? It had been a happy lunch hour.

Jake sighed deeply. Nothing was ever so awful that something good wouldn't come of it as well. The old silver lining on a dark cloud bit. But this secret business meeting, this lousy underhanded midnight thing behind his back, was—was—. Jake couldn't even think of a word for it.

"Fatherly guidance, my foot," he muttered. "My million bucks was all they wanted." And they were going to cheat him out of it. They were going to invest everything in complicated business actions, and he, Kolbe, was too dumb to know what to do. Did he have anything for a lawyer, the cops, a private investigator? Heck, he could do his own private investigating. He was doing it now, wasn't he!

And not for the first time in the past two years did he regret his lack of a proper education. Should have listened to the oldie-moldie relatives. But they, like his youth, were history now. He almost cried. Man, for a couple of seconds there he had visions of himself sitting there, crying like a baby, on a willowy aluminum ladder, in the dark, in the middle of the night, and the four old guys up there poking their heads out the window. The vision made him break out in cold sweat. He groaned, climbed another rung, then stopped again. Yeah, he was now a dumb millionaire, doing his own sleuthing. Hell, this was a fine time to get poor again. Miss Nye, beautiful Antoinette Jean, could, and probably would, do better than marrying a nobody. Jake went up the ladder all the way to the second floor.

Hey! Was he a ghost or something? They didn't even notice him. He sat sideways on the window sill, with his legs still outside, almost opening his stupid mouth and saying "hi."

The four men were sitting around a small table in the middle of the room, each with a stack of papers, notebooks, pens, and drink glasses in front of him. Zimmerman's deep voice boomed.

"Two point five million is a good starter—if we keep the jerk out of the deal."

The others nodded. Then Henderson said, "R. J. Brauser Trust mightn't go for it, though. After all, to them it's a mere bag of peanuts." Henderson sniffled, groped for a handkerchief, then sneezed—once, twice. He turned his head towards the window for the third one. Jake stiffened, but Henderson hadn't seen him. No-

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body has yet learned to sneeze with open eyes.

"As I've said," Henderson faced the others again, "we mightn't have enough dough. Sure you won't reconsider cutting in—?"

"No!" yelled Colbert, Zimmerman, and McPhee in unison. All three gave their different versions of: you cut that pea-brain in, then I'm out.

Jake thought angrily, "They are talking about me!"

The men around the table rustled papers. Henderson sneezed twice more. "Should shut that damn window," he muttered. "A person can catch bloody pneumonia in this place."

Zimmerman answered, "Can't smoke in here with the thing closed. Wife'll call the fire department—like last time."

Nobody even glanced towards the window. They lit more cigars, and refilled their whisky glasses.

Jake had pulled one leg inside, finally ready to make the grand entrance, when Zimmerman took out his cigar, turned it this way and that, coughed, and then said, "Only way we can get this thing off the ground, without that jerk getting wise to our scheme and blocking everything, is to get rid of him completely."

The others grunted agreement. Jake almost fell out the window. Oh man, oh somebody! They were going to kill him. Jake got both legs outside again, turned his torso slowly—sudden quick moves would finally and certainly alert those old geezers—felt his way carefully down two or three rungs, then ducked his head. He went down even more quietly than he had ascended, if that was at all possible, and moved quickly around the house, down the long dark driveway, and out into the road. His car was parked in the next block. He started to grin, then caught himself and growled instead:

"Let Zimmerman ponder over the ladder outside his den window."

**M**iss Nye giggled. Jake watched her, fascinated with the cute dimples in her cheeks, the beaming light brown eyes with little golden flecks in them, and the bobbing blonde curls around her sweet round face. Jake's heart boomed so loud and so quickly he was afraid it would show on the outside of his new grey business suit. He heard the words she was saying, but he had trouble connecting them. He'd much rather grab her and kiss her. It was true what they said about being in love, then. Christmas, Fourth of July.

"Firecrackers!" he said aloud.

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"Huh?" Miss Nye stopped giggling.

Jake cleared his throat. He picked up a stack of papers; let them drop again. He turned towards the window; he wished he could stop blushing and his heart would stop beating.

"What do firecrackers have to do with poor Mr. Zimmerman's coming late to work?" Her eyes were big and round, her lips parted in astonishment at the strange outburst.

"What? Oh. Mr. Zimmerman is never late," he said, ignoring her embarrassing question. He wished he had listened to what she had said before.

"That's right—never! Anyhow, can you imagine what would have happened if the burglar had actually entered the house, and Mrs. Zimmerman, big Mrs. Z., had caught him?" Miss Nye laughed so hard at the imagined scene that little shiny tears entered the corners of her eyes.

Jake forced a small laugh. He hadn't even thought of Mrs. Z. last night. Heck, if she had spotted him on that ladder—he shuddered.

"Right!" laughed Miss Nye. "He'd have been a mess of pulp!" She made squishy gestures with her little hands, threw the invisible results on the floor, and stomped her foot on it.

"*That's* what would have happened to the burglar," she said with relish.

Jake nodded. That's right, that's what could have happened to him last night. He had been in such a rage that being seen by anybody but his partners hadn't even entered his head.

"... police crawling all over the old mansion, taking fingerprints..." Miss Nye's imagination was running wild.

Jake involuntarily clenched his hands into fists and stuck them in his pockets. He had been so dumb, so utterly dumb. Why hadn't he put the aluminum ladder back beside the garage where it usually hung? But no, he had lost his stupid head, of course, hadn't he! Had panicked like a little kid. For a moment a picture of himself a few years back rushed through his mind. Man, he had been unbelievably immature, naive, young, then. Jake blinked his eyes and shooed off those memories. The unwashed, innocent man with the tattered, floppy jeans, the almost waist-length hair, the beads, was far off now. His candlemaking days, every candle a piece of art, had abruptly come to an end when he came into all that money. Money, he thought sadly. And now they were going to kill him for it. He sighed deeply.

"Are you feeling all right, Mr. Kolbe?" Miss Nye rushed over to

Jake, holding onto his arm. His heart did that damn boom-boom thing again, and this time he grabbed Miss Nye and kissed her right on her beautiful bud mouth.

"Mr. Kolbe!" she said after a short while, breathlessly. "Oh, Mr. Kolbe!"

Jake stood there, head bent, eyes closed, still holding onto Miss Nye.

"Sorry," he muttered, thoroughly embarrassed. "It's my heart. I mean, it's the noise in it—and I don't have long on this earth—and—damn it, I love you!" And with that he kissed her again. This time it wasn't a short moment, either.

**"H**e has a bad heart," sobbed Miss Nye. "He isn't long for this earth!" She grabbed another couple of tissues from her skirt pocket.

Mr. Zimmerman looked aghast at the secretary. "Are you sure he's dying of a heart ailment?"

"Oh yes, oh yes, I'm sure!" Her narrow shoulders shook, and her nose started to run.

"Well, well, one never knows who's next, does one? I wonder why he's keeping it from us, his partners." Zimmerman doodled on the cover of his large green appointment book. He also wondered why Kolbe had told Miss Nye. Being a most unromantic person himself, it never occurred to him that a thing called love could have entered the picture.

"Thanks for telling me, Miss Nye. I'll have to let the others know as soon as possible. I have to go out now. Will you please send memos to Henderson, Colbert, and McPhee, telling them to come over to my house tonight for an important meeting? Unfortunately it has to be late again, well, maybe ten o'clock, because I promised my wife another dinner out. Domestic help still got the flu, you know." He pushed his appointment book aside, clipped his gold pen into his breast pocket, and got up.

"And, Miss Nye, make darn sure that Kolbe doesn't get to know about it!" With that he strode out of the office.

**J**ake was disappointed because Miss Nye, Antoinette Jean, had left for her lunch hour before he, old slow-brains, had thought of inviting her out to eat. Would he ever learn to be quick? He hoped so. He had to be on his toes from now on. If only he knew what his partners had in mind. If only he knew how, and



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when, they planned to do him in. How did one eliminate a business partner without being found out? Shoot him and make believe it was done by some weirdo off the street? Push him out a window? He looked down on the traffic. It was a long way down.

"Hi, Kolbe!" Jake jumped. He hadn't heard Colbert come into the office. He quickly moved away from the window.

"Nice weather. Looks like summer is finally here." Colbert picked up a folder from the desk and left the room.

Jake was still numb. "He's much bigger than me," he thought. "Given half a chance, he could easily have shoved me out the window." He closed it. He then buttoned his jacket and went out into the hallway.

"Hey, Kolbe!" roared McPhee's voice. "Let's forget about the elevator and get some exercise walking down the stairs. Eight flights of stairs is a perfect way to get rid of all the kinks from sitting on the backside all morning."

Jake started to sweat. He was now going to be pushed down those concrete steps, was he? No way!

"No, 'fraid not," he said. "I'm in a hurry." Luckily the elevator doors had just opened, and he quickly stepped inside. McPhee shrugged his shoulders and headed for the exit sign by the stairway.

It was a warm sunny day. Jake took a couple of deep breaths. He was oblivious to all the foul city smells and the droning noises of buses, delivery trucks, and cars, the hurrying people, sirens, and beeping. This was safe territory, man. None of his partners would risk killing him out here where he was surrounded by masses of witnesses.

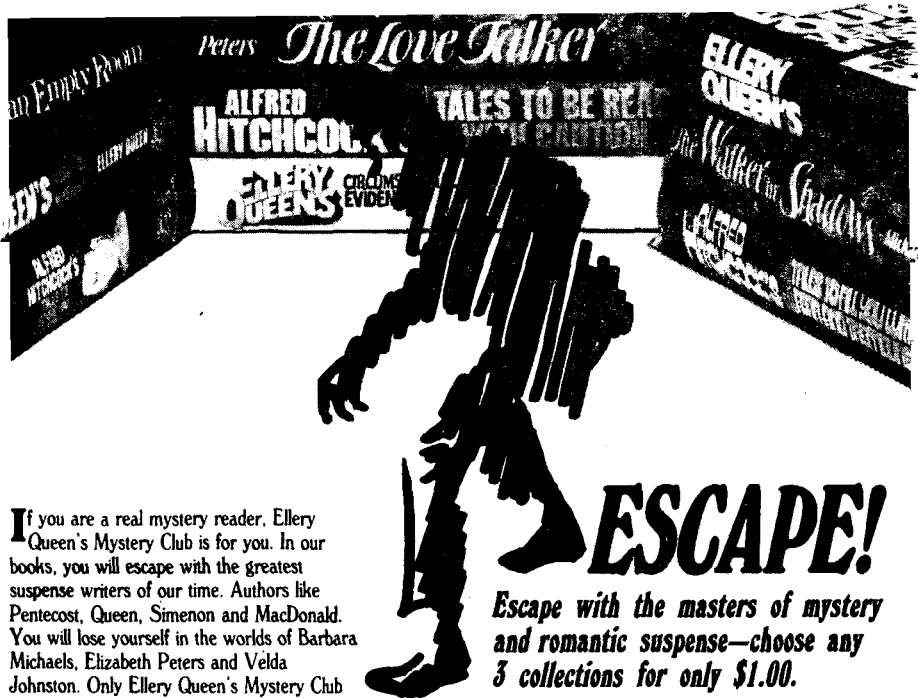
He just missed the traffic light, the WALK sign, at the corner. He stood right at the edge of the curb, with throngs of people waiting behind him. Endless rows of cars went by, some turning the corner. And Jake's spine started to tingle. All that was needed was a quick, anonymous push from behind. Wildly he spun around—and looked straight into Zimmerman's eyes.

"Hi!"

"No! I—I have to—" and blindly Jake forced his way back through the crowd. He fled into the McDonald's at the next corner, ordered a Big Mac and coffee, and flopped himself, exhausted, into one of the brightly colored, narrow plastic railway seats. The two kids opposite him, black twins, looked up, astonished.

"Your legs are too long for here," remarked one of them.

Jake groaned. "Long legs are okay. See how I fold them under



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the table?" He took a big bite from his hamburger, chewed for a couple of moments. "What's not okay is money. Having lots of money is a horrible thing."

The youngsters were impressed by such a serious statement. They looked at each other, nodded, then looked happily at Jake. The one on the right stuffed half a dozen french fries into his mouth, then said:

"Him an' me don't have to worry about money. We are only seven."

**A**t two o'clock they were all back at work. Zimmerman signed contracts. Henderson and McPhee spoke into dictaphones, and Colbert and Kolbe, who shared a large office together with Miss Nye, carefully reread several documents.

Jake had calmed down. Business was, after all, business, and matters like murder and love had to be put aside for the time being. Miss Nye looked several times, concerned, towards Jake's desk. He pretended, of course, that he didn't notice. She didn't look too well. Was she getting ill or something? Why did she make those funny little hiccup sounds now and then, and her eyes were red. Flu? Or maybe she was worried about her poor sick mother. Sweet Miss Nye. He, Jake, was *not* going to get murdered! Oh no, he was going to make heaven on earth for darling Antoinette Jean. What a pretty name. He signed his name to two papers without reading their contents overly carefully.

The two men walked together to the car park at the rear of the building. They were both fumbling for their car keys when Henderson coughed and then went over to Jake's car.

"Listen, Kolbe," he said, "I hope you don't mind my saying so, but you—er—you look a little peaky. You feeling all right?"

"Oh sure, I'm fine," answered Jake, surprised.

"Well, you look peaky to me. I just thought I'd share some of my vitamin B stress pills with you. Lots of vitamin C added to them, too. Here, take these. I have plenty more." And with that Henderson shook out half a dozen orange, oval pills into his hand and gave them to Jake.

"They'll do wonders. Well, bye for now, Kolbe."

"Yeah, bye."

Poison! So, that was the latest, huh? He was now supposed to take these pills and drop dead in this parking lot, was he! Oh

no—not here. Having their dumb partner die so close to the office wouldn't be very smart. Nope, that wouldn't do at all. Jake threw those ugly waxen pills into the gutter and climbed into his car. He was getting their drift perfectly. He was to swallow the poison, hop into his car, and somewhere out there in rush hour—. The evil of it all!

When Jake got home to his apartment, he did something he usually did only at social gatherings: he fixed himself a large martini. He drank it quickly, and felt a little better. After a second drink he felt quite calm. He put on his favorite tape, rock music from the mid seventies, and started on yet another martini. Jake felt now positively unwound and even a little cheerful.

Had those pills perhaps really been vitamin supplements? Maybe Henderson, maybe all his partners, had changed their minds about getting rid of him. The contracts they had entrusted him with today had been real heavy stuff. Tears came into his eyes. They had trusted him. Jake finished his drink, thought "what-the-heck," and mixed another one. The music got to him, too, and he turned it a little louder. He snapped his fingers and tapped his toes in tune. Man, this was neat. Yeah, it was a neat world after all. And tomorrow he would kiss *her* again. She was so dear. Jake took another sip from his glass. His partners, kind Mistrs Zimmerman, Henderson, Colbert, and McPhee, probably wanted to keep him alive after all. And he, Jake, was going to enroll in more adult evening classes come September. He was going to show them! He was really going to be with it from now on. Hell, up to now he had been barely aware of all the different "attractive investment packages" his money was tied up in.

Could his partners actually get rid of him and then keep his dough in the company? On the whole, he thought not. He had no living relatives, so his money would most likely go to the state in the event of his death. Vow! Jake finished his drink. His head was spinning. He laughed.

"When I marry Miss Nye and we have a little boy and a little girl, no partners are going to keep my investments, and no state is going to get my million bucks out of me!"

He changed the tape and put on something jazzy. Jake felt squeasy. He really oughtn't to have thrown out those vitamin pills. Had he been overly rude to poor Henderson? Yeah, he guessed so. He ought to phone him up and thank him. Where had he put the

number? Jake grinned. Wasn't this a wonderful opportunity to phone his sweetie and pretend he had lost Henderson's phone number?

"Mr. Henderson?" she said. "Oh, you won't be able to reach him at home tonight. He's at a mee—. Oh, er, oh."

"It's okay, it's okay. Come to think of it, it can wait till tomorrow. So, how are you? How is your mother? Aunty?"

Afterwards Jake couldn't remember anything at all of the conversation. All that milled around, screamed around, his head was the one word: meeting. Hell, they were at it again. Behind his back they were plotting more secret business transactions, and he, Kolbe, was in the way, was he? Well, this time they were not going to get away with it. Oh no! He downed the rest of his martini, grabbed his jacket and car keys, and rushed out of the apartment.

**T**he clock on the dashboard read ten thirty. There was little traffic at that hour, and Jake pushed the throttle right down to the floor. He raced along long stretches of roads, tore wildly around corners, and finally reached the part of town where all the large old mansions stood well back in parklike gardens. Zimmerman's would be just around the next corner, on the road with all the large over-fifty-year-old chestnut trees.

"This is one secret meeting that isn't going to stay secret for very long!" he growled as he screeched around the last corner. Damn those trees! He nearly missed the entrance.

Jake could hardly remember how he'd gotten there. That had been some drive! He walked up the Zimmerman driveway and over to the detached garage. The aluminum ladder wasn't hanging on the hooks on the wall. Jake walked all around the three-car garage, but no ladder. Oh well, he would just go over to the mansion and perhaps find it somewhere there. He looked all around him. The moon made everything look such a strange pale green. He had to stop for a moment, holding onto a large craggy tree trunk. His head was spinning. Was this what the moon did to the world at night? It seemed he hadn't had the time to enjoy it for a long, long while. He closed his eyes, but he just couldn't remember what color the moonlight was supposed to be. Was he *that* drunk? He shook his head. Hadn't there been—ages ago—a carefree, bearded young man with beads sitting under moonlight like this? He sighed, then opened his eyes again. Still everything was greenish. He giggled.

This was funny. Man, he *was* intoxicated. Then he remembered why he was there—and frowned.

Jake looked for the aluminum ladder, but it didn't seem to be near the house, either. Tired by then, spent from his initial rage, he leaned against a small Japanese plum tree, its low branches hanging over him like an umbrella. He glanced up at Zimmerman's den window—and quickly grabbed a branch and pulled it over his face. Through gaps in the foliage he watched as all four of his partners came to the open window. None of them spoke for a while. There was tall broad-shouldered Henderson, his partially bald head reflecting the moonlight. And beside him, leaning over the window sill, was short, skinny McPhee with his handlebar mustache. Behind the two stood Colbert with his funny-parted hair, and big fat Zimmerman.

Jake, under the tree, tried desperately to become sober. He bit off one of the leaves and chewed it. It was so hard not to laugh out loud when he expected his partners to burst into barbershop songs at any moment. Silvery moon songs.

But the four men in the window did not have song on their minds. Jake strained his ears and was perfectly able to follow their conversation. Everything else in the big garden was very quiet, almost eerily so.

"Things have changed now," he heard Zimmerman say. "The big deal went through smoothly enough without young Kolbe's finding out about his money being used. Poor fellow just isn't bright enough for that kind of business. But we did need his money."

"Well," broke in Colbert, "I for one am glad we didn't actually have to—well, you know what. It's a darn shame, of course, that, as our partner, we'll have to give him his share of the profits. But then again, it's a whole lot safer than getting caught and being put away for life."

"Still, can't have him hanging around now. He's bound to find out we did the deal behind his back. Kolbe can't be all *that* stupid," said little McPhee. "We have to do something with him."

Jake started to sweat under his tree. Now what were they plotting?!

"Best way to get rid of young Kolbe is—" Henderson took a sip from his glass, "—send him over to the Coast. He'll do all right in our branch office out there. Small place like that is more his style. California weather will be better for his health, too. Poor guy looks quite peaked lately."

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"Has a bad heart," remarked Zimmerman.

"Nuh," grinned Henderson. "Has a bad case of lovesickness. Haven't you people noticed him ogling little Miss Nye? Saw them together at lunch the other day. Shouldn't wonder if we didn't have to part with our secretary as well in the near future."

So that was it! California—wow! Jake slid to a sitting position on the dewy grass under the tree. He didn't care who saw him now. He was going to live! No more looking back over his shoulder; no more worries about car wheels, open windows, and poison. Visions, in technicolor almost, of a bikini-clad Antoinette Jean on the beach, with her dear mother and aunty sitting near by on colorful deck chairs, all breathing in beautiful fresh ocean air—it was too much for the sensitive, happy young man, and he almost burst into tears.

Later that night Zimmerman followed his visitors out to their cars. Henderson looked admiringly at the moonlit landscape.

"Well," he said, "it's a darn shame to tear down all these lovely old houses. But progress is progress." He sighed.

"Yes, properties are too big and expensive in this area for single family dwellings," agreed McPhee.

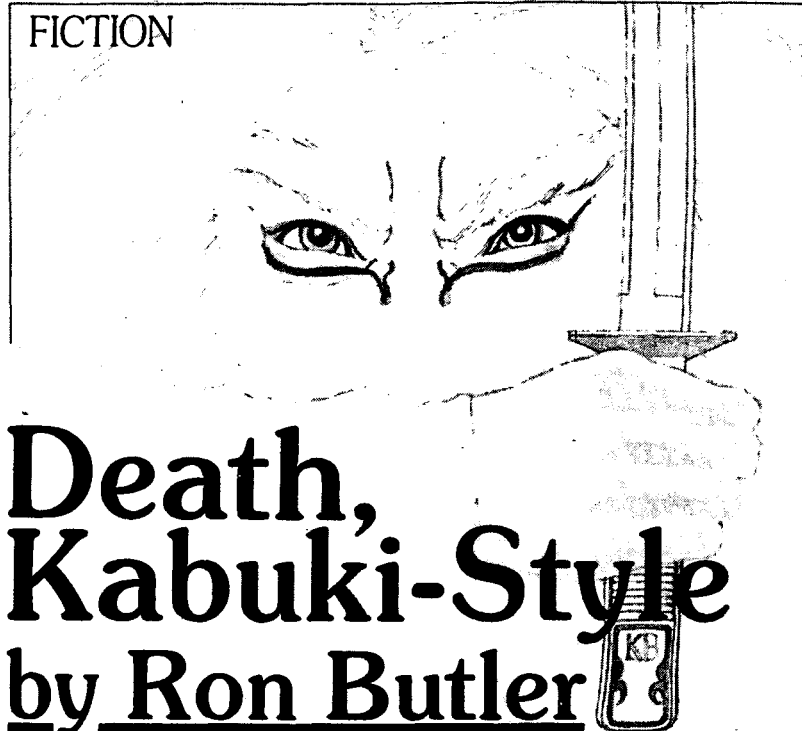
Colbert was already halfway in his car when he stood up again and said, "Zimmerman, I know I can speak for all of us when I say: thanks for letting us in on your little private enterprise. We just know this is going to be one of the finest housing developments in the whole town."

The others nodded in agreement. Then they took off, and the moon kept on shining—very pale-yellow, almost white now—on the happy young man asleep under Zimmerman's Japanese plum tree.

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FICTION



# Death, Kabuki-Style

by Ron Butler

**P**olice Inspector Toshihiko Ueki's question on the telephone that summer morning was the very one I was hoping he wouldn't ask.

"Have you and Noriko selected names for the twins, Sam?"

Choosing names may not seem like much of a problem, but being married to Inspector Ueki's daughter and living in Japan called for a degree of diplomacy, of wending a way

through the complicated trail of family sensitivities.

My last name—Brent—was, to my way of thinking, going to have to be modified by something acceptable in two countries and languages. But how? When confronted with such perplexities, I usually go for the simplest solution—stalling.

"Noriko and I want to talk it over a bit longer."

"That is understandable, Sam. In the meantime, I have two

pleasant surprises for you."

"Yeah?"

"First, we have been invited to attend a kabuki play tonight." There was a mutual pause before he went on. "You do like kabuki, do you not?"

"Sure," I said, bending the truth a notch. "Just because I'm in the computer hardware business doesn't mean I don't like the fine arts. What's the other surprise?"

"You," the inspector replied, "are going to receive a singular honor from one of Okayama's most respected citizens, Shinji Nishikawa, before we go to the play. And all of us tonight are his guests."

The name rang a bell. "Nishikawa. He's some kind of educator, isn't he?"

"You are well informed," said the voice from the telephone. "He is the president of Okayama Institute of Technology."

Ueki rang off before I could learn anything more than the name of the place where we were to meet, and I was beginning to entertain visions of medals and plaques for my business accomplishments when Noriko warned me that I would soon be late for work.

On the way to the office, I guessed that I was being invited to join an exclusive club for businessmen.

There was a good-sized crowd

at the beer garden atop one of our city's immense department stores, and I noted the appreciative glances cast in Noriko's direction as a waiter led us to our table. Inspector Ueki and another man got up, and Noriko and I were introduced to Shinji Nishikawa, a tall, broad-shouldered man who would not have seemed out of place on a football field.

"Mr. Brent," he smiled, repeating a bow for Noriko. "I see that the stories of your wife's great beauty are not overstated."

I grinned my agreement, and Noriko did a magnificent job of lowering her eyes, blushing, and murmuring sweet denial. Pitchers of foaming domestic beer were set before us, and for the next few minutes we exchanged a remark or two about the ruby sparkle and glitter of the Asahi River below us as it flowed southward to the Inland Sea under the setting sun.

Nishikawa and the inspector were watching me closely, I noticed after a moment. It made me nervous because staring at anyone is impolite in Japan—doubly so if the person in question has red hair and blue eyes.

Nishikawa chuckled. "Please excuse the lapse in manners, Mr. Brent, but I am somewhat excited about the special offer I am about to make."

I wondered which club was seeking my membership and how much the annual dues would be.

Nishikawa sat up straight in his chair, placing one hand on top of the other. "Mr. Brent, with the unanimous approval of professors and staff, I want to ask you to teach at Okayama Institute of Technology."

I was too astonished to reply.

"He is asking you to become one of the institute's faculty," the inspector said helpfully.

"But," I objected, "I'm not a teacher. My specialty is computers, and surely there are enough qualified Japanese computer people . . ."

Nishikawa held up his hands. "This is not a matter of specializations or expertise alone, Mr. Brent." He looked at the inspector, then back to me. "As an American, you work at a disadvantage here, yet you have succeeded in building trust in your own product while earning the respect of your Japanese employees and your competitors."

"Thanks, but what's that got to do with wanting me to teach?"

"What we have in mind," Nishikawa said, "is as much exemplary as technical in nature. We would like our students to learn what can be accomplished by honest hard work, and to teach them that these traditional business values should

extend to international trade."

Uh oh! I thought. The stink over car imports back home and the barrage of charges and denials revolving around some of the computer industries in the two countries were distressing. And would anyone really care to listen to Sam Brent reading from his own book of personal philosophy, his collected works on the advantages of honesty and competence?

I put an arm around Noriko's shoulders.

"It's a lot to ask."

Inspector Ueki smiled through a haze of pungent cigarette smoke. "You can do it, Sam. Noriko and I would be proud to call you *sensei*."

*Sensei* has long been the title of titles in Japan, with a broad meaning that stretches from doctor or professor to learned master. I wasn't at all sure that I deserved the honorific, but the prospect of working with a captive audience was too tempting. At the very least, we could bat some ideas around.

"All right, Nishikawa-sensei, I'll have a shot at it, but you know I can give only so much time each week because of my business obligations."

Nishikawa's bow brought his head almost level with his waist. "*Domo arigato gozaimasu*." Thank you very much for what you have just done. "I am ashamed that our budget limits

the salary to three hundred thousand yen a month, Brent-sensei, and promise to increase the amount as soon as possible."

"Hey," I surprised myself by saying, "that's too much money!" It was, in fact, more than most people earned on a full-time basis in other occupations.

"Do not be reluctant, Sam," Inspector Ueki said in English. "To pay you less would reflect poorly on the institute and your own status. Also, the money will aid in raising my grandchildren."

Ueki's reasoning was infallible, and I held out my hand to show I didn't mind being overpaid.

"This is a happy moment for me," Nishikawa said. "And I see that our other guests for the evening are here, in time for refreshments before dinner and kabuki." A balding man in a brown suit walked across the beer garden in the company of two younger people.

The inspector hulled a pistachio with his teeth. "You have planned a party for Sam."

"In a sense," Nishikawa said. "I try to meet socially each month with different members of the faculty and their students. Tonight, Professor Tsuso Inaba and two of his graduate students can help us celebrate Brent-sensei's addition to our numbers."

In the midst of what should have been a moment of personal glory, I found myself disconcerted by my impression of Professor Inaba and his students. Inaba didn't look at me once the whole time we were at the beer garden. Even when we bowed to each other and voiced the ritual courtesies, his eyes were everywhere but on my face. Shy in the presence of a foreigner? Maybe. Whatever the reason, it got to me—and the girl, Shinobu Sano, bothered me even more.

She was exquisite, making me think of the radiant beauty of Ingrid Bergman in her movie portrayal of Joan of Arc. There was a difference, however. Bergman's loveliness was warm and close, while Shinobu's was that of a ringed planet photographed from space: cold and remote, almost awesome in its unreal perfection. Shinobu Sano seemed a creature sculpted in ice.

The other student, Genichi Kurokawa, got under my skin, too. He was, from what I could tell, one of those macho types, affecting the aloof, haughty look associated with Musashi, a samurai who performed feats of extraordinary swordsmanship in the first half of the 1600's. I never cared much for what we used to call drugstore cowboys, and Kurokawa struck me as the Japanese equivalent. People

who have to imitate Musashi—or John Wayne, my own favorite—seem synthetic to me.

I glanced over at Noriko. Her smile, as usual, dispelled my gloom. If I was on edge, it was natural. Being elevated to the heights of unexpected prestige could make anyone dizzy.

Nishikawa was talking to Professor Inaba. "I am asking each faculty member to advise me of his plans for the political rallies scheduled soon, Professor Inaba. Will you participate, or will you take advantage of the dismissed classes to do something else?"

I heard the professor reply that he would attend the rallies before I lapsed into thought again.

Rallies. Pleasant memories. College kids around a bonfire, working up their enthusiasm for the big game as pretty cheerleaders went through their motions. But, later, somber gatherings, turning angry. Protests against a war, against the murder of a civil rights leader. Demonstrations that grew ugly and brutal. Kent State. A national political convention marred by tear gas and broken skulls. People in turmoil.

It happened here, too, in Japan, a country that prides itself on social order and self-discipline. The rumor that American ships or aircraft were using

military facilities while armed with nuclear weapons was enough to stir sharp protests, as was continuing inflation.

College students weren't the only ones who, from time to time, expressed their feelings in large demonstrations. Unions, political factions, townspeople united in a cause—anyone who felt his rights or beliefs were being abused or restricted could take to the streets.

While most of the turnouts were orderly, the potential for danger was something Inspector Ueki talked about often, even after the frequency of disruptive events began to diminish. "Mob psychology," he said, "requires nothing more than a taunt or a thrown rock to ignite rapid violence."

Not long after I came to Japan a demonstration at one of Okayama's larger universities had overflowed into the surrounding residential and business areas, ending with the death of a student.

Enough! I ordered myself, picking up my mug of beer. Why get bent out of shape over nothing? Being asked to stand in front of a lot of people and teach was a heavy demand, but a man who could run a profitable business ought to be able to handle it. There wasn't a reason in the world to dislike Inaba or the two young people. Inaba

was probably showing respect by not looking at me directly, and, instead of labeling Kurokawa and the girl as arrogant and aloof, why should I not see them as assured and confident? As for the demonstrations, Okayama was living up to its reputation as a peaceful city now, calm and affluent.

Proud of snapping back to my old self so easily, I looked up and realized that Inspector Ueki and the others were wrapped up in something the professor had been talking about.

"I did not want to bring up such a subject at this time, but perhaps I would be remiss in my duties if I did not mention it to a police officer."

President Nishikawa stood up. "No, you are quite right in speaking up, sensei. Nevertheless, we have arrangements for dinner before the play, and I refuse to let anything detract from this celebration for our new professor."

I took Noriko aside as we waited for an elevator and asked her what was going on.

"Really, Sam, you should not wander off in your private thoughts so much. The professor is reporting missing gold from the institute."

"That's what I thought," I said. She didn't bother with additional commentary, and I suffered the ensuing taxi ride in guilty silence.

"How much gold is involved?" Inspector Ueki asked as we manipulated our chopsticks, placing strips of beef and sliced vegetables into the boiling oil in the gas-heated cooking pan at our table.

Professor Inaba answered quickly. "All three bars are gone from the cabinet over the sinks. A total of about eighty-four grams."

"How is the gold used in your laboratory?"

"It is vaporized in minute quantities to prepare specimens for observation under the electron microscope."

"Who has access to the laboratory?"

"It is a private research laboratory with sensitive equipment that is not used for teaching, so only three people now have keys—myself and my two student assistants here." Genichi Kurokawa inclined his head, and the woman, Shinobu Sano, smiled modestly.

The inspector's eyes began to show interest. "Ah. Now, how large is an ingot of this gold?"

Inaba put a finger on Ueki's cigarette lighter. "Smaller than this."

"I see. Then I recommend that we continue to enjoy our evening together. There is no reason, I think, for police action."

"How's that?" I said, allowing Noriko to load my plate.

"Because," the inspector said, "there is no motive."

"Wait a minute," I protested. "That doesn't add up. Three ounces of gold is worth enough to supply plenty of motive."

President Nishikawa cleared his throat. "Inspector Ueki has a point, Mr. Brent, if you understand that gold cannot be bought or sold except under strict government regulation, which involves a close check on all transactions."

"Is it not possible," Noriko asked softly, "for this precious metal to be smuggled out of the country, or perhaps to find its way to our own underworld markets for greater profits?"

Inspector Ueki grinned affectionately. "That is an accurate assumption, Noriko, but we are in the company of a respected scientist and his students, not common thieves or gangsters."

"So where's the gold?" I asked.

"Unless I am severely mistaken," the inspector said, "the gold is precisely where it belongs—in the laboratory. It is all too easy to lose track of small objects. Tomorrow, if it is convenient for everyone, we will make a thorough search."

From the street, the kabuki theater was unimpressive, a drab concrete building with no saving

touches of architectural embellishment. Inside, however, it gave one the impression of being in another dimension, of being surrounded by exciting sounds and colors. Our seats were near the end of the *hanamichi*, the ramp stage that extends into the audience. I settled back in my chair comfortably, relaxed by the gentle rippling of the green, black, and russet-striped curtain, the tuning of instruments, and the muted thwack of wood clappers being used backstage by the director as he gave last-minute signals to the performers.

President Nishikawa turned toward me. "I suppose that kabuki must strike you as a very alien art form."

"On the contrary," I said with a grain of truth, "it reminds me of opera."

What I didn't say was that my one and only exposure to opera had come via television and that the little I knew about kabuki came courtesy of Noriko's tutoring. Kabuki, she informed me, is the original soap opera of Japan, tales of thwarted or illicit love, of revenge, thieves, courtesans, and noble warriors dying unselfishly for their lords and friends. There is music without words and narrative without music, soliloquies which mean as much to a kabuki aficionado as a favorite aria to an opera devotee.



That much I could handle without trouble. One aspect of kabuki, however, bothered me: it excluded women. How could anyone be seriously interested in a play, knowing that all the female roles were played by men? Originally, as Noriko outlined kabuki history, the plays were put on by all-women troupes, but they were barred by the Tokugawa Shogunate in 1629 because it was feared that their presence in public was a corrupting influence on men. I also knew that the female characters still maintained a stage position at least one meter behind the male characters, a sign of the respect demanded of women during the Tokugawa reign.

I sneaked a quick glance around the audience; no one else seemed uneasy about being present for a male-only play, so I composed my face into an attitude of interest and vowed to refrain from any comments that might be misinterpreted.

Watching the stage, I began to regret very deeply that women's kimonos are a rarity now in all but the entertainment fields, at least in the larger cities. Even Noriko wears one only once a year, on the first day of the new year when friends and relatives come to visit, and hers is a formal black. What I was seeing now was dazzling—kimonos of vermi-

lion, scarlet, and powder blue, sashes contrasting vividly with the intricate designs of the robes.

The overall sense of drama was heightened by heavily-lined faces that created a mask-like emphasis of nose, eyes, and mouth.

With a few whispered aids from Inspector Ueki and Noriko, I was able to accompany the actors on their journey through an incredible maze of unfolding human tragedy, only mildly interested at first, then becoming totally fascinated by the delicate dramatization of a theme initially made famous in the western world by Sophocles in *Oedipus Rex*.

The Japanese names and setting, I thought, would have made no difference to the Greek playwright. Before me, punctuated by poignant notes from samisen, flute, drum, and koto, was the story of two people in love, Ootose, a prostitute, who was nevertheless a kind, loving person, and Juzaburo, a sincere working man. As their love for each other develops, they meet Osho, a thief who discovers that the three of them are brothers and sister, split up and farmed out by their parents as children.

Out of mercy, Osho takes his sword and slays his younger brother and sister because of their sinful love. I caught myself holding my breath during

the death scene, captivated by the stylized poses called *mie*, a type of acting that reflects the Japanese belief that human emotions are best revealed through the eyes.

Toward the end, with strips of crimson cloth representing the blood of the lovers, Ootose and Juzaburo bring their hands together to pray for happiness in the afterworld, but their fingertips are bent, symbolizing the paws of a dog, reminding the audience of the disgrace that has come to them.

During the death scene, I noticed that Shinobu Sano was enthralled, hands clutching the back of the seat in front of her, breath rapid, eyes shining. More reason, I thought, not to regard her as such a cold fish.

"What did you think of this presentation?" the inspector said as we waited for taxis.

"Next to that, our own problems seem unimportant."

"And what of your opinions?" Ueki said to Shinobu Sano and Genichi Kurokawa.

The young woman raised her eyes to his. "I believe this is the most significant kabuki work I have ever seen."

Inaba and his students took one cab, and Nishikawa shared the next one with us. It was decided en route that Ueki and I would go to the institute in the morning to help look for the gold.

"As you are making the visit anyway," Nishikawa said, "could you stop by my office? I would like for you to meet some of the other faculty and to discuss your teaching schedule."

"A pleasure, sensei."

We dropped Ueki and Nishikawa off, and Noriko snuggled close. "You truly enjoyed the play, Sam."

"How could you tell?"

Noriko's laughter, Pan's pipes in a glade of merriment, filled the taxi. "You did not fall asleep one single time."

Inspector Ueki slid open the entranceway door in the morning and boomed out salutations. I kissed Noriko and the twins goodbye and stepped down into my loafers. "We can take my car."

He looked at me pensively. "Okayama Institute of Technology is situated at the top of a difficult mountain road."

Rather than resume our continuing argument about the wisdom of allowing those not born to the intricacies of Japanese traffic to drive, I got in the inspector's car and hit the radio switch, turning the dial to find a wrap-up of last night's baseball games.

The inspector turned it off.

"Why? Don't tell me you can't drive and listen to the radio at the same time."

Ueki braked at a four-way

stop near a rice shop, then turned onto a lane bordered by a deep irrigation ditch on one side and a cinder-block wall on the other. "I have ventured out this way on other occasions, Sam, and I will tell you that it is not easy, even for a native driver."

A left turn put us on a narrow stretch of blacktop that didn't impress me as being any different from hundreds of others in Okayama. "Any *decent* driver could navigate this with one hand, Toshihiko."

The inspector let the remark slide, moving dangerously close to the front of a vegetable stand as a taxi inched by from the other direction. Seconds later, we were at the foot of a mountain, and I could see the road twisting its way ribbon-like to the top. At the first of the ninety-degree turns, Ueki slowed to a snail's pace to check one of the large steel mirrors on posts the Japanese use to see what's coming from the other direction. Past that, we came upon knots of students making their way to the institute, bent over as they strained against the steep incline. It was our luck, I thought, that the institute was one of the few Japanese colleges to hold summer sessions.

Ueki gave repeated blasts of the horn and eased through the opened human passageway.

"There is no need to be anxious, Sam."

"Who's anxious?"

The inspector grinned as he brushed by another cluster of ascending students. "My mistake. Perhaps it is customary for Americans to press both feet against the floor when they are passengers with Japanese drivers." A show of irritation would only give him satisfaction, and as we drove through the gate at the top, I tried to cloak myself with the dignity that seemed appropriate for someone about to become a professor.

"I wasn't uptight about safety, Toshihiko, only thinking about that missing gold."

"Ah. Well, you may rest easy on that count. If the gold is not found promptly, I will treat us to a lunch of iced crab."

I didn't think wagering went with my new exalted status, and wiggled out of the sub-compact silently after Ueki parked by one of the institute buildings.

The institute was spread out along the S-shaped curve formed by the ridges of a mountain rising some fifteen hundred meters above sea level. President Nishikawa's office, on the top floor of Number One Building, provided a perfect view of the colored tile roofs, rice paddies, and garden plots in Tsushima District.

On hand to greet us with stiff

bows were several men introduced as deans or heads of their departments. Inspector Ueki excused himself soon after, pleading an appointment with Professor Inaba. I wasn't happy about being excluded from the search for the gold, but there was nothing I could do except sip green tea and try to keep up with the polite chitchat.

The get-acquainted ceremonies took half an hour, the nitty-gritty two minutes.

"I assume you'll want me to start during the fall term?"

"We would prefer," Nishikawa said, "that you commence this very week, tomorrow if you are able. We have enrolled a number of students in your class who are most advanced in computer studies."

Zapped again! Every time I got comfortable with Japanese customs, I'd trip across something like this. To me, the request to start teaching on such short notice seemed precipitate, darned near compulsive in nature. To them, it made sense. The decision to bring me into the faculty fold took what would seem a long time to most Americans, but it's the Japanese corporate way to strive for unanimity, to wait until everyone agrees on all aspects of a proposed action before taking a vote. After that, it's right down to business without further delays.

And why should I complain? The system works for them, and there was a personal bottom line: why gripe about inadequate time to get used to the idea of being a professor when I was to be paid three hundred thousand yen a month? I'd have to talk to Goto-san, my chief clerk, but I couldn't foresee any major obstacles in being freed for an hour or so a day.

"I'll give you a call as soon as I can see the people at my office." I bowed my way out of the room before anyone offered more tea and found Inspector Ueki standing near a window in the corridor, smoking impatiently.

"What's wrong? Couldn't you find the gold?"

Ueki frowned. "Yes, it was found, and that is why I am waiting for you to return to Professor Inaba's laboratory with me."

"If the gold's there, that clears up the whole thing, right?"

The inspector turned and started down the stairs. "Sam, no one can—or will—explain discrepancies in the stories about that gold."

What the heck? I'd humor him and then we'd get back to work.

The laboratory door was ajar, and we entered a room crammed with paraphernalia that reminded me of something out of a science fiction movie. Profes-

sor Inaba, in a white coat, came toward us; the two students we'd met the night before hovered over a piece of equipment next to a windowless wall.

"Inspector Ueki and Brentsensei. I know that you have a few more questions, but I am already late for a meeting." He took off his lab coat and folded it over a metal stool. "It is rude of me, but I will have to ask you to wait for me."

As he made his exit, I ambled over to the students while Ueki began digging through his pockets for another cigarette. The young woman—Shinobu Sano—was probing for something at the bottom of a test tube.

"Specimens?"

"*Hai*," she said, not looking up from her work. In profile, she was quite beautiful, black hair trimmed short, lashes curving up gently above lustrous dark eyes. The most remarkable thing about her to me, however, was not her physical attractiveness, but the fact that she was here, at the institute, studying for an advanced degree. There are only a smattering of professional women in Japan, a doctor or two here, a college-level teacher there.

My thoughts were scattered by a shout from Genichi Kurokawa. "Inspector, please do not light that cigarette!"

Ueki removed it from his lips.

"Why not?"

Young Kurokawa touched a rubber hose connected to a burner. "The laboratories are equipped with gas lines, and smoking is prohibited."

"In that case," Ueki said, "let us spend more time in discussion about the gold."

Kurokawa pushed his long hair back from his eyes. "We have told you everything we know, inspector."

"Of course," Ueki said amiably, "but Brentsensei was not present, and I request that you repeat it for his benefit."

Shinobu walked to a wall cabinet and tapped the glass with a fingernail. "As you can see, all of the gold is here."

I went over with the inspector and looked. Behind the glass were three yellowish ingots arranged in neat order.

"Three," I said. "The original number?"

"Yes," she said, one hand resting quietly in a pocket of her lab coat, the other fingering a sleeve. "There can be no doubt that Professor Inaba simply misplaced the gold."

The inspector slapped a closed notebook against his leg. "But it was on a table, not in the cabinet, when we came in this morning."

"I think," Shinobu said, "that the sensei was so involved with his work that he laid the ingots down yesterday before we left

to meet you and then forgot. I put them back in the cabinet a few minutes ago."

"What you are implying," Ueki said, "is that Inaba-sensei is . . . preoccupied."

The students exchanged glances before Kurokawa spoke. "Please excuse us, gentlemen, but Shinobu and I are not saying that our professor is absent-minded. Nevertheless, he is engaged in an important research program, and it is possible under such circumstances to be inattentive to other matters."

"That could explain it," Ueki said. "Would you have time to tell us something about this research project?"

For the next half hour, we heard about Inaba's work in tracing the origin of the greenish buckwheat used for soba noodles by studying spores from archaeological sites under the electron microscope. Noodles! My attention strayed to possible places for lunch, and much of the conversation sailed past me harmlessly.

The telephone rang and Shinobu answered it, listened for several seconds, then hung up. "It was Inaba-sensei. It seems his meeting is running late."

"Very well," Ueki said, "we will see him some other time. Are you ready for lunch, Sam?"

I was already at the door.

"Listen, Toshihiko," I urged

as he dawdled with the pieces of cold octopus in vinegar, "why not forget it? There was no theft, and a man as busy as Inaba can be forgiven for letting something slip his mind."

"Sam," the inspector said slowly, "allow me to relate what happened when I went to the laboratory this morning." He scooted his beer glass back and forth in its puddle on the table. "I arrived at the same time as the professor and his student associates. Inaba put the key in the door but it was unlocked, a condition he did not try to explain. I said nothing, and we entered."

"I went directly to the cabinet over the sinks. The gold was not there, so I turned to look at the rest of the laboratory and saw the ingots lying on a table next to some textbooks. When I asked Inaba to come look, he was startled—almost pale—and I felt that Shinobu and Kurokawa were rattled as well."

"Toshihiko, hardly a day goes by when I don't see you in a dither because you can't remember where you've put those smelly cigarettes. I mean, okay, so it's a little odd, but that's all. No crime, no need to blow more time on it."

Ueki finally attacked his lunch. "Unexplained variations are disturbing to me, Sam, as, for example, an unlocked door and Inaba's convenient depar-

ture for an alleged meeting at a moment when he may not have been prepared to face more questions."

"You've got a suspicious mind, even for a cop."

"Yes, and that is why the taxpayers do not begrudge my magnificent salary."

He dropped coins in a cigarette machine while I waited for the cashier to count out my change.

**B**y the second session of my class, I was getting to know the students fairly well—their names, backgrounds, and aspirations—and they wised up to my weakness for baseball. A healthy chunk of class time had already gone by in my fervent accounting of how Whitey Ford pitched in a World Series game.

There were some things I hadn't expected in the classroom surroundings, such as no air conditioning or central heating, but the rest brought back memories: white-smudged chalkboards, dusty erasers, and the same kind of desk-chairs I squirmed around in from grade school through four years of college, sponsored by a basketball scholarship. Most of the guys wore their hair long, their jeans sloppy, and their sandals without socks; the women were neater and a lot more demure than I remembered from the

States, but that was far from a disappointment.

On the fourth day of teaching, we were preparing to take up multilingual programming when Professor Inaba came to the classroom door, apologized, and asked if he could speak to me for a moment.

"Sensei," he said, looking up and down the hallway in an agitated fashion, "the gold is gone again—all three bars have been taken."

"You're sure it wasn't misplaced?"

"I am positive."

"I'll call Inspector Ueki." I asked him to wait in his lab and dismissed my class.

Each of the inspector's words was like a hard karate chop. "You will listen while I recapitulate, then you will speak. First we have a report of gold that is missing, followed by the discovery that it is still in the laboratory, only the door is unlocked and the ingots are on a table instead of in the cabinet." He put his hands on his hips and glared at them. "Now you call me in to say the gold is gone again. What am I to believe, other than that someone is playing foolish games or lying?"

Kurokawa's face darkened. "That is an unjust statement, inspector. This time the gold was stolen and we know who took it."



"I am waiting," the inspector said.

Inaba worked the top button of his lab coat repeatedly. "You will have the truth, Inspector Ueki, but as it involves other people at the institute, it is given with reluctance." He turned to face Shinobu. "Sano-san, please tell the inspector exactly what happened."

She appeared perfectly at ease. "Kurokawa-san and I had just come to the laboratory when we received a telephone call from a man who boasted that the gold was in the possession of the Red Flags."

Ueki hissed in exasperation. "Do me the honor of explaining why the Red Flags would bother to take the gold."

"The reason," she said, "is Professor Inaba's leadership of the Japan New Right Party at the institute." She hesitated, eyes unmoving from Ueki's face. "I thought you knew about that."

"No. No, this comes as new information. May I assume, Sano-san, that you and Kurokawa-san also support the views of the Japan New Right Party?" Ueki's tone now was mocking.

"Oh, yes," Shinobu smiled. "It is our privilege to serve in small ways."

By this time I might as well have been listening to a speech about astrophysics in Bulgarian. "What . . . ?"

The inspector plowed past

me. "Would anyone care to speculate about why the Red Flags arrived at such a scheme and, if it does not offend anyone, how the gold was pilfered?"

"The idea for taking the gold," Inaba said, "may have come from us." He waited to see if the inspector was going to comment before continuing. "With some regret, I must confess that the institute was rife with stories about the gold after it was misplaced. Academic gossip spreads rapidly."

Inspector Ueki was looking at something on the ceiling. "Entry!" he snapped. "Could it be that someone forgot to lock the door again?"

"No, inspector," Inaba said calmly. "The door was secure when my students got here, so someone must have a duplicate key."

Ueki turned his back on the three. "This is an official police case. You will be interrogated at length later. Sam, if you have time, please follow me to headquarters in your car. I wish to speak to you in private."

I felt like a two-legged question mark as I walked out to the faculty parking lot.

"Whatever you say, Toshihiko, don't tell me it's 'relatively simple.' Just fill me in on the Red Flags and that other group, whatever it's called."

Inspector Ueki tilted back in

his swivel chair. "Red Flags is a political organization espousing Leninism-Marxism with a Japanese overcoating, and the Japan New Right Party is one of the more extreme ultranationalist groups."

Now I recalled hearing about it. The JNRP wanted to bring back the old warrior code, throwing out the present constitution and restoring total authority to an emperor, the military, and big business. It endorsed the views of the factions trying to revise the history books so Japan would be absolved of all blame for a war that ended with two mushroom clouds; those factions bore equal hatred for the United States and the Soviet Union.

"Too bad a bunch of nuts like that can run loose around the institute."

Ueki nodded. "Maybe, but Japan is not the only country where radicals concentrate around colleges and universities. In such places they can attract impressionable, inexperienced people who can be misled into confusing extremist causes with idealism."

"I can't see how a fellow like Inaba could get himself mixed up with a crowd like that. Respected, well-paid scientist—the whole bit."

It was usual, Inspector Ueki told me, for students and some faculty to form associations to

express diverse political views, and there were no rules or laws preventing them from belonging to outside organizations.

"They compete with each other for followers, is that it?" I put my coffee cup beside the other empties on Ueki's desk.

"That competition for followers," the inspector said, "is where the danger lies. When the radicals confront each other or the police, injuries and death are probable."

A link snapped into place for me. "You think the Red Flags are throwing the glove down to the Japan New Right Party? Swiping gold from one of the party bigshots would be a hell of an insult, three ounces of pure ridicule."

Inspector Ueki went to a window and pushed it all the way up. "Consider this, Sam. A police investigation of the Red Flags, if it did take the gold, would be disastrous, resulting in arrests and expulsion from the institute. Knowing this, why would its members risk theft, then brag about it to bitter rivals?"

The link loosened. "We're missing some vital data, To-shihiko."

"Try this," he said. "Tomorrow, both the Red Flags and the JNRP have scheduled afternoon rallies, including parades. How do you compute that, Sam?"

"To come up with anything

meaningful," I said after a moment of brow-knitting, "we ought to figure on the probable involvement of Inaba, Kurokawa, and Shinobu."

"Why?" He leaned against a bookcase.

"They accused the Red Flags of an illegal act, but their story is fishy as the devil."

"Advice?"

"Be ready for trouble in the afternoon, Toshihiko."

Inspector Ueki smiled. "You have definite potential, Sam, for coming to a right conclusion—with a little prompting." He sat down again. "For example, will people not begin to wonder if you and Noriko do not pick names for my grandchildren soon?"

Back behind my own desk, the glimmering of an idea for names was filtering through. At home that night, sitting with Noriko in our family room, I sought her opinion.

"Husband," she said, "no matter what my father sometimes says, I am inspired by your brilliance."

**I**dle conversation is rarely the reason for a three A.M. telephone call, but Inspector Ueki's impatience did little to wake me up. "Nothing's important this time of morning. You want me at headquarters? Now?"

Noriko climbed out of our fu-

ton, trying to soothe my feelings. "Sam, you should be pleased that my father seeks your company when he faces snags in his work."

"Yeah." I groped around for pants and shirt and made two false starts for the door before successfully collecting my driver's license and my socks. Noriko gave me a small bundle tied with plastic ribbons and instructed me to give it to the inspector.

The streets were quiet, and the only sign of life, near Korakuen Park, was a road crew making repairs, in the considerate Japanese way, before the crush of morning traffic.

A desk sergeant I recognized waved me into the main section of Okayama police headquarters, and Inspector Ueki asked me to take a seat while he finished making notes from a teletype printout. Instead, I walked out into the corridor and paid the coffee machine for two paper cups filled with an acid potion which Ueki contended was universal fare in police stations.

"Domo," he mumbled. Thanks.

"What's up, besides me?"

The inspector yawned and drank from his cup. "Following inquiries that were initiated yesterday afternoon, we have warrants for the arrest of Tsuso Inaba, Genichi Kurokawa, and Shinobu Sano."

"Whoa!" I was wide awake, eyes back in focus. "What have you got on them?"

"Enough. Do you care to hear it from the start?"

"Either that or fall asleep on the sofa."

The inspector spoke with the remarkable economy of words that characterizes the type of Japanese used between men who are close friends. A good part of the afternoon, he said, had been spent in extracting information from the Red Flags. After a few hints about the consequences of failing to cooperate, they opened up, admitting that the gold was found hidden in the bottom of a filing cabinet at their headquarters on the evening of the play, the night Inaba had told us it was gone.

From the outset, the Red Flags were suspicious. Inaba's leadership position in the Japan New Right Party and the use of gold in his laboratory were common knowledge. The Red Flags came to the conclusion that Inaba was scheming to have them banned from the rallies later in the week, leaving the JNRP unopposed in its bid to gain support from the non-aligned students. Inaba, they reasoned, was a super-capitalist who would not hesitate to accuse their communist group of stealing a symbol of wealth—gold—to make him lose face.

They decided to go to Inaba directly, perhaps administer a beating, and warn him to forego further stratagems. Inaba and his students, however, were no longer in the laboratory when the Red Flags people got there. Instead, they found only the janitor making his rounds, cleaning and waxing floors. They told him they were Inaba's students, and were permitted to enter the lab without question. They left the gold on a table, sure that it would be an adequate warning to Inaba that his scheme was futile.

"And they left the door unlocked after putting the gold back," I said.

"*So desu.*" That is right. "It explains the reaction of Inaba, Kurokawa, and Shinobu when the four of us walked into the laboratory by way of an unlocked door and found the gold waiting for us. What fools they must have felt after trying to arouse my official interest!"

"What'd you do next?"

"I looked into Inaba's claim that a duplicate key must have been used on the second occasion the gold was reported missing, and confirmed my understanding that the locksmiths of Okayama have an agreement with the big industries, colleges, and universities not to copy keys. When such work is required, it is done at the concerned institution, and

careful records are kept. There was no sign that anyone at the institute requested an extra key for Inaba's laboratory. Why the puzzled look, Sam?"

"Motive for the second taking of the gold, Toshihiko. It's not clear yet."

"It will be," he promised. "I knew there must be a compelling reason for Inaba to take the risk of coming to us with yet another version of stolen gold. Accordingly, I ordered two of my best men to keep him in sight."

Inspector Ueki massaged his neck muscles. "Last night, the professor went to Kobe with Kurokawa and Shinobu. The men keeping them under surveillance took the same train, telephoning ahead to Kobe for jurisdictional approval."

"Then . . . ?"

"At the Kobe station, they went by taxi to a man's home, stayed a little less than an hour, and returned to Okayama, where, due to an unfortunate crush of late-hour passengers, they left my men behind. A little later, I received a message from the Kobe police. The man visited by the JNRP people was identified as an influential *yakuza* mobster who specializes in gun smuggling and who is also known as a vocal sympathizer with the JNRP."

I turned as cold as the coffee I was drinking. A Japanese citi-

izen may, after passing a stringent examination, obtain a hunting license, but civilian possession of any form of handgun is strictly prohibited. Weapons smuggled into the country for criminal use bring an exorbitant price. The thought of guns in the possession of *any* radical group was frightening because the very risk involved in obtaining them suggested sinister intentions.

"That was enough evidence for arrest warrants, Toshihiko! If guns are involved . . ."

"*Hai*," the inspector said, flicking crumbs of tobacco from his rumpled shirt. "We could have acted on the assumption of illegal firearms, but I wanted as much evidence as possible. At my request, the Kobe police got an emergency search order and raided the man's house. He refused to talk, but the gold was recovered. That is when I put out the arrest directive."

I abandoned my spot on the sofa for some floor pacing. "Assuming the worst, the JNRP has a gun, or guns. My God, do you think they are going to use them on the Red Flags?"

Ueki turned his head toward the electric wall clock. "We have already discussed the rallies set for this afternoon at the institute by the Red Flags and the JNRP. But now, Sam, we must strengthen the normal police presence for such activi-

ties. I am very much worried about this."

"How many guns would three ounces of gold buy?"

Inspector Ueki considered the question for a moment. "An illegal gun, as you know, carries a premium price in the underworld. If the Kobe gangster sympathizes strongly with the JNRP, he might have provided more than one weapon, although I doubt it."

"At least there's still plenty of time, Toshihiko."

"Sam," he said "when fanatics are at large there is seldom adequate time to prevent senseless behavior, and we have not been able to locate Inaba, Kurokawa, or Shinobu. I believe they are going to the homes of various JNRP members to give instructions for today's troublemaking."

"The least I can do is stick around and help you stay awake." I handed him the package from Noriko. It contained disposable razors, toothbrushes, and a roll of antacids.

We grinned at each other and took the time to clean up.

Well after sunrise, Inspector Ueki said he saw no reason why I shouldn't go to my office and take advantage of a day without classes to catch up on my work.

Goto-san was in an irritable mood. "We have so many new

installation orders that it will require overtime for all of us."

"All right, Goto-san, bring on the paper work."

He rolled up his sleeves. "Inspector Ueki called a few minutes ago and said he was on his way to President Nishikawa's office for an urgent meeting concerning the rallies."

I was planning on being there in the afternoon anyway, before the rallies started, but if the inspector said something was urgent, it was. I grabbed my jacket and got out of the office before Goto could remonstrate.

I took the mountain curves at reckless speed, unimpeded by pedestrians or other cars until I neared the final turn leading onto the campus.

There I came to a quick stop, blocked by a solid wall of people carrying Red Flags banners. Fifty meters distant, just inside the gate, I made out Inspector Ueki, waving to me frantically.

I got out of the car and made my way toward him. No one tried to stop me, but I received some surly looks, and thought a lot of the people were too old to be students.

"There was no need for you to be here, Sam," the inspector said when I reached him. "I only meant to advise Goto-san that I would be here in case you tried to call."

Yeah? Then how come he was waiting at the gate for me? I

smothered a grin. "What's up?"

He started for Number One Building. "Obviously, the Red Flags have taken us off guard by an unexpected change in their timetable."

"So, what's the urgent problem?"

Ueki stopped by the entrance to the building and stared at me. "What the Red Flags are trying to do is to gain control of the campus in order to prevent the JNRP from staging its own rally."

Clear enough. It wasn't necessary for the inspector to add that the JNRP were going to be furious when their members found their hated ideological opponents in control of the only road leading to the institute.

And someone in the JNRP might be armed!

"You've called out the troops?"

"Yes, but too much time has been wasted. Listen."

The surrounding hillsides echoed contemptuous challenges from the Red Flags' bullhorns, challenges that were soon answered from the distance by other electronic voice enhancers.

The JNRP were gathering below.

Should I risk getting my car out of harm's way? The Red Flags began a determined march down the road, cutting my vehicle off from sight completely, and I decided that my hide was

more important than any canary-yellow automobile.

President Nishikawa was standing in his office door, his head bowed in what I took to be anger or disappointment. I left him alone and listened in as the inspector discussed the developing situation with Headquarters over the telephone. He was still talking when the first of the police helicopters skimmed over the mountain ridges, setting down by the front gate with an ear-splitting clatter.

From the front window of the office, I watched as stern-faced riot police climbed out and unloaded supplies—tear gas, shields, and stout nightsticks.

I noted that the rest of the campus was almost deserted, except for about fifty students—some of whom I recognized as mine—who stayed well behind the forming police lines, looks of distress on their faces. It was a lucky break, I thought, that most of the students and faculty were finding other ways to spend the school holiday than coming to listen to what was billed as speeches.

"Have you got enough men to keep the Red Flags and the JNRP apart?" I asked as Ueki came to the window.

"To make sure, Sam, contingents of Home Defense Forces from Okayama have been asked to deploy at the foot of the



mountain between the JNRP and the Red Flags while we move in from the rear."

Home Defense Forces is the euphemism for Japan's military, and I remarked that it was unusual to have a combined operation like this.

The inspector called down to two uniformed policemen, one carrying a walkie-talkie, then turned back to me. "We have two mobs massed near us, tempers are running hot, and someone, somewhere, may be carrying weapons. That, to me, qualifies as unusual."

I ducked as a chunk of concrete crashed through the window, then observed the police subduing two men who had apparently sneaked around the protective lines by the gate.

"Outsiders," Nishikawa said, behind us. "Who else but an outsider would profane the institute by doing such a thing?"

I was inclined to agree.

Not long after I met the inspector, the two of us had been present at another violent clash, the police versus a coalition of farmers and radicals protesting the taking of lands needed to build Narita International Airport outside of Tokyo. On that day it was charge and counter-charge, truncheons, fire bombs, and tear gas, but all of it was contained, remote from populated areas.

What we were embroiled in

now was a battle one shade removed from urban warfare. Several hundred policemen were deployed for control of the institute grounds, cutting off the lone access road. Twenty meters below the police barrier, the Red Flags occupied a large section of the roadway, chanting, bellowing defiance, holding aloft a billowing black-trimmed banner bearing the likeness of a student from another college killed in an uncontrolled outburst of ideological fervor several years ago.

We couldn't see the JNRP turbulence, but the radio link to the Home Defense Forces brought crisp reports of military and police vehicles being overturned and burned.

And then came the dispatch that caused deep personal alarm for me—the JNRP was spilling out into the fringes of Tsushima District.

Ueki and I looked at each other. The district is large, but that was where Noriko and the twins and I lived, only a few kilometers from the institute. I breathed a little easier after the inspector snatched up the telephone and sent standby police units to guard the bridge and back lanes near the house.

Ueki was marking positions on a hand-drawn map when a slightly distorted voice from the walkie-talkie warned that the JNRP had forced a gap in

the military line and was scrambling up to attack the Red Flags. All that separated the new breed of fascists from the communists was a rapidly narrowing band of hot blacktop.

"We must stop them!" Inspector Ueki ran outside to the commanding officers of the police squads. I recall straight-arming a wild-eyed demonstrator who got in my way as the phalanx of police ahead of us tore through the Red Flags, gaining momentum as they clubbed and shoved rioters off the road. They mauled the advancing berserkers of the JNRP and merged with the soldiers, preparing for a unified push and encirclement.

Professor Inaba was down in the roadside rubble—down and dead. Inspector Ueki went through the clothing quickly. No weapon. We moved on. Near the bottom of the road, in a secured section by a small pharmacy with shattered windows, we found Genichi Kurokawa lying on his back in a pool of blood, his lips drawn back in pain.

The inspector unbuttoned the youth's shirt and looked at the wound.

"Who shot you? Where are the guns?"

Kurokawa reached out and clutched Ueki's arm. "Shinobu . . . only one gun." The mushy rattling in his chest as

he spoke seemed to surprise him.

"You are dying," Inspector Ueki said, not unkindly. "It may be that other lives can be saved if you tell us everything."

As Kurokawa fought to bring out the disconnected words and phrases, I could almost see past the glaze over his eyes, into the actual events he described.

Genichi Kurokawa, he told us, could name the precise day and hour when he met Shinobu Sano, because the strengthening of his own dedication commenced from the moment he fell in love with her.

She was different—vastly different—from the other women students at the institute. Hers was not the talk of tea ceremonies or ornamental paper folding, but of the glory of Japan, past and future, of the day when, once again, the rising sun emblem of Nippon would strike fearful respect into friends and foes alike.

For long hours, as they worked in Professor Inaba's laboratory, she spoke of a Japan bound in abject slavery, with the foot of the demon Americans in the small of its back and the knife of Soviet imperial greed at its throat. "Always," she lamented, "we must suffer their insults and threats. Our nation is still festering with the sores of American military bases, our fishing fleets and northern is-

lands are subject to Russian aggression. Who can say that it is other than ignoble to lie thus for so long, smothered under the slime of foreign ambition?"

On the day Shinobu Sano asked Professor Inaba to take her into the ranks of the Japan New Right Party, Genichi trembled, in fear both of the boldness of such a request from a woman and of the denial that might drive her away. But Inaba, like Genichi, was spellbound by the intensity of Shinobu's commitment to the JNRP's values.

"When you were assigned to me as a research assistant," Inaba said, "I never dreamed I was in the presence of Musashi's feminine reincarnation."

Shinobu did not, at these words, bow in the way of women, hands pressed against her knees, but gave a military salute. And, thought Genichi, this, too, was after the manner of Musashi, the great samurai whose name is synonymous with unswerving loyalty to the way of the sword.

Momentarily, Genichi was enmeshed in ropes of pain, of hot, wet weakness that threatened to end the flow of words he vaguely recognized as his own, but it diminished as he recounted Shinobu's plan.

"We will triumph over the Red Flags yet," the boyishly

slim Shinobu had insisted. "Professor Inaba's contact has said that he is willing to supply one gun for the gold, and that will suffice for our needs."

"I am not wholly convinced yet," Inaba objected. "The Red Flags may have told the police that we tried before to implicate them in the theft of gold. Who but an idiot would try to accuse them a second time?"

Shinobu drew back her shoulders. "To achieve victory, to bring Japan back to its feet, we must eliminate the communists. Again and again, we must do all in our power to vanquish our foes."

"But surely the police will move against us," Kurokawa cautioned, "if Inspector Ueki sees through this new idea."

"He won't," she said. "Once the gun has served its purpose, it will be secreted in Red Flags headquarters, more skillfully than the gold was." She smiled reassuringly. "After an anonymous call to the police, the Red Flags will no longer stand in our way to enlist new supporters for Japan's cause."

"You do not fear that we underestimate Toshihiko Ueki?" Kurokawa asked.

"No," Shinobu said. "Once the police find themselves the target of gunfire, they will move swiftly to avenge the action. They will think as we wish them to—that the communists

traded stolen gold for a weapon. Finding the gun will be all the proof they need."

Genichi moaned, seeing again that terrible smile on Shinobu's face as she had boasted of shooting Inaba.

"Shinobu! He was like a father to us, the man who helped you!"

She had tightened the white headband across her forehead. "And he has made the supreme sacrifice of love for his country by becoming a martyr."

"You said the gun would be used only to provoke the police into overreacting!"

"I used a small deception," she said. "I did not know if you would agree. It is better, however, to blame the death of our own party members on the communists than to shoot a few unimportant policemen."

"No!" He flung an arm across his chest as she turned the gun on him.

"Martyrs!" The woman dressed as a man laughed and slipped back into the seething maelstrom of outrage, in search of another sacrifice.

Genichi Kurokawa could say no more. His dread was a ring of coldness, with himself at the center, drawing shut inexorably . . .

"Lunatics, Toshihiko, that's all they are," I said, looking down at the body. "Taking their own gold twice, hatching gran-

diose schemes—and now this. Two of them dead, and all for a perverted dream of national glory."

Inspector Ueki wiped his hands on his trousers. "Shinobu is still out there, Sam, and I think she may try to add to the number of her victims."

We were running again, toward the last battleground by a rice paddy where JNRP stragglers kept up their feverish chanting, encouraging each other not to give up. We stopped by an armored personnel carrier and Ueki, after showing identification, borrowed binoculars from two lieutenants of the Home Defense Forces.

Shinobu was standing a short distance behind a ragged grouping of tired rioters, disguised in nondescript dark slacks, a sleeveless denim vest covering a loose-fitting man's shirt, and the strip of white cloth that bound her hair.

"There, Toshihiko, by the culvert!"

He pinpointed her in short order, asked for and received a rifle with a scope from one of the officers, then picked her out again. I felt my pulse drumming as we watched her take out the handgun, moving to the edge of the culvert, sighting on someone we couldn't see. A split second after Ueki fired, I saw her spin around, gun flying from her hand.

A squad of soldiers went with us for protection, but they weren't needed by then; police were herding the last of the dissidents into vans.

Shinobu was trying to crawl on hands and knees toward the gun. Ueki kicked it out of reach. Shinobu turned her head, smiled vacantly, and whispered something as we drew nearer.

"Martyrs! All of them, martyrs." It was the last thing she said.

"Look." Inspector Ueki touched the dead girl's hands. The fingers were bent, like those of the shamed and dishonored lovers in the kabuki play who died a dog's death, holding out paws instead of hands as they prayed for the life to come, actors in a make-believe world where men played the roles of women.

Ueki sat down on the ground tiredly and lit a cigarette.

Maybe Shinobu's flexed fingers were nothing more than a physiological response to a painful death. But, to this day, I still have the feeling that she was boasting at death's door of how, kabuki-style, she concealed her identity as a woman on a man's stage of violence, unnoticed and unashamed as she murdered two people to further her political beliefs.

"She will not be the last, Sam."

"Pardon?"

Ueki was removing the cartridges from Shinobu's handgun. "Until recently, the insanity of mob behavior was restricted by tradition to men. We are changing, Sam, and I am sorry to see it happen this way."

"It was clever, Toshihiko. She figured no one would ever catch her."

The inspector gazed at the pale, dead face. "She was wrong." He stepped on his cigarette. "There are many things still requiring my attention, Sam, and determining the fate of your car is one of them."

I didn't care, right then.

President Nishikawa's personal vitality was still subdued. "The name of Okayama Institute of Technology has been sullied by what happened here today."

"I disagree," Inspector Ueki said. "As soon as you learned that the Red Flags were not honoring their schedule, you called me, and ultimately, it is for the police and military to keep the hotheads under control."

"Can't you do something about the radicals?" I asked.

"One-eighty," Ueki remarked, and Nishikawa laughed, softly at first, then at full volume.

"You've left me in the dark—again," I said.

Nishikawa bent over and picked up a sliver of glass from his office carpet. "We have a belief that most of the young people who claim to be revolutionaries now will, once they get out into the real world, do a turnabout of a hundred and eighty degrees, gradually assuming the moral duties owed to family, company, and country. In other words, Brent-sensei, we stress patience."

"Even with someone like Shinobu?"

"Sam," the inspector said, "it saddens all of us to see young lives thrown away, and our primary obligation is to prevent it from happening, trusting that responsibility will come with maturity. Sometimes we fail, but always we hope."

Reasonable enough. "I wonder if any of my students were involved?"

Ueki grinned. "As a matter of fact, Sam, they were the ones who, at some risk to themselves, moved your car before too much damage was done." He took his jacket from the back of a chair. "Shall we go see?"

It was in the faculty parking lot, keys in the ignition. I cranked it up. "Sounds okay to me."

The inspector walked around the vehicle. "I think there are some new dents and wrinkles, Sam, but only a few more than

you usually have."

I came within a hairsbreadth of not reminding him of the twin-naming party at our home.

Goto-san showed up first, bearing presents for the twins, for Noriko, and for me. Yumiko and Noriko were both wearing formal black kimonos, and I was taken aback by the change in our resident nanny and housekeeper; rather than being her old, brusque self, rather than saying whatever came to mind, the old woman moved and spoke modestly.

Next to arrive were Inspector Ueki, his wife Hanako, and our old friend, Mayor Yukuo Kawahara. The inspector laid claim to our one upholstered wing chair, while the others took places on the sofa or the cushions spread over the hardwood flooring. Noriko and Yumiko, bowing their way into and out of the room repeatedly, brought in trays laden with strong green tea, summer sake meant to be poured over ice, and strips of pressed cuttlefish, then took seats among the others.

The conversation was hushed and general; after a catastrophic day of destruction and bloodshed, I hadn't supposed anyone was in the mood for jocularity until Mayor Kawahara rose to his feet, smiling, and made the little noises that pre-

cede a speech.

"I do not mean to be presumptuous," he said, "but it is the nature of politicians to make remarks and open discussions, and all of us are awaiting an end to the suspense. With which names, Brent-san, have you and your delightful Noriko decided to honor your sons?"

"Get up," Yumiko snapped, reverting to normality.

At that moment, my earlier certainty about the names wavered. But across the ocean, in the Midwest of America, lived my parents, two brothers, and a sister, and there would come a time when they would meet the twins, using the names we bestowed on them.

"I guess I'd better explain," I said, licking dry lips. "Life's full enough of problems, and no one wants to look for more hassles. Noriko feels the same way. Whatever we can do to make it easier for our kids to get along peacefully and happily is worth the effort, and that's why we've picked these names."

"Yes?" Mayor Kawahara encouraged me.

I took the plunge. "In Japan, they'll be called Kenji and Jo-

taro. And, back in America, it'll be Ken and Joe. We'll, ah . . . we'll try to teach them that being decent and understanding with all people earns a lot of points."

Convinced that I'd overdone it, I sat down next to Noriko again. There were a few thoughtful smiles, but no one said anything, and I contemplated leaving the room until I took note of the gleam in Inspector Ueki's eyes.

"What do you think of that, Toshihiko?" I asked, ready to settle for even mild approval.

The inspector stood up and bowed to me. "To a man who must too often use weapons to protect decent people, the events of this day, and especially of this evening, have reminded me of a common, often-ignored message found in the writings of Confucius, the teachings of Buddha, the Talmud, the Koran, and the two great Testaments."

"What might that be, Father?" Noriko asked.

"Blessed are the peacemakers," he said, and I felt the tightening grip of Noriko's hand on mine.



FICTION

# The Case of the Amateur Detective and the Chicken by James A. Noble



**P**olice Captain John Evert liked his young new detective sergeant, not only because he had already solved an extremely difficult case that had been lying around in the files for five years, but also because of his logical mind and enthusiasm. Of course, the captain would never admit that to anyone, so when Detective Sergeant Mark Murphy entered his office carrying a cardboard box, he feigned irritation.

"Murphy, if you haven't solved

another case, I don't want to see you."

"I guess you'll want to see me then," said Mark, putting the box on a chair along the side wall and closing the door. He pulled a small cassette player and a cassette tape from the box and set them down on the captain's desk.

"How'd you get so dirty?" asked the captain. There were dark smears and spots all over the detective's shirt and suit.

Mark looked down at his shirt

front. "I've been collecting some evidence."

"And is that a shiner I detect developing?"

"Huh?" replied Mark. He winced as he reached up and touched the left corner of his eye. "Oh. I had a difference of opinion with a guy who works on one of those city sanitation trucks."

Captain Evert's curiosity got the better of him. "This story I've got to hear. Which case is it?"

"The Mannerly murder and accidental death."

"That happened Monday night and today is Thursday. You mean it took you three whole days to figure this one out?"

"Actually, I would have figured it out in one day, but I had to wait for some reports. Wait till you hear this."

Mark loaded the cassette tape into the machine and held down the rewind button. The captain leaned back in his wooden desk chair and prepared himself for what he knew would be an entertaining trip into the world of "detectivery" as only Mark could do it.

Mark Murphy was the son of Jim Murphy, one of the best street cops the city had ever seen. When Jim had been killed in the line of duty five years ago, Mark had applied all his energy toward becoming a po-

liceman. In that five-year period, he made detective sergeant, and the first major case he solved was one leading to the arrest of his father's killers.

Mark had not acquired many of the traits of his tough Irish father. Jim had been a big strapping fellow with light wavy hair and steel grey eyes—slow talking and easygoing when he wanted to be, lightning quick and rough when he had to be. His son Mark, on the other hand, was tall and gangly with dark hair and eyes. He was constantly in motion and possessed of all the nervous habits likely to drive his wife crazy, or anyone else he was around. He wore his suits loose and his ties thin. Both seemed to take a few moments to catch up with him whenever he took off running. The only time Mark acted like his father was when he was deep in thought or partaking of his much loved after work beer. If you closed your eyes and listened to Mark talk during those times, you would swear you were hearing Jim Murphy.

"This is the Alvin Mannerly murder confession," began Mark, when the tape had rewound. "We found it in the living room along with the body and the smashed cassette recorder. Relatives have identified the voice as that of Mr. Mannerly. Listen." Mark pushed the play button, and the sound

of someone clearing his throat could be heard. The voice was that of an obviously upset, distraught man.

"My name is Alvin Manerly. I am making this tape so that anyone listening to it will understand the reasons for my actions.

"I have always believed that when a man and woman are married, they should remain faithful to each other no matter what happens. While I have been faithful, my wife, Audrey, has not. I have suspected for some time that she was having an affair with another man, but it wasn't until today that I was able to obtain proof. I'm not neurotic or anything, it's just that when I started paying attention to certain little facts—undeniable facts—I knew she was telling me lies about where she was and what she had been doing today.

"First, there was the matter of her car. It started raining early this afternoon, and when I pulled my car into the garage next to hers at around four fifteen P.M., I noticed it was wet. I compared its odometer reading with the one I had written down before I left this morning. Like I said, I'm not nuts or anything. I just wanted to collect some information on her activities because I felt something was going on. Anyhow, the reading on the odometer indi-

cated she had driven the car exactly eight miles. When I asked her where she'd been, she said she'd never left the house. I also discovered that her coat in the hall closet was damp. I didn't say anything, but she wasn't fooling me.

"Then there were her clothes. She always gets dressed when I do. Then she goes downstairs and makes breakfast for us before I go to work. This morning she put on slacks and a pull-over, but when I came home, she had on a blue skirt and a blouse. I asked her if she wanted to go out tonight, figuring she was dressed good enough to do so, but she said she didn't feel like it. Little wonder—she had already been out. I could think of a good reason for her changing clothes, but I kept quiet.

"She told me another lie at dinner. Like I said, I was keeping my eyes open and my mind sharp. I really like fried chicken. You know, the way they make it at some of those fast-food chicken places. Audrey experimented a little bit and came up with a thin, seasoned batter. She puts lots of oil in a big cast iron frying pan, dips the chicken in this special batter of hers, and it makes fried chicken just about like you would get from one of those fast-food joints, only a lot cheaper. Anyway, she told me she had spent much of the afternoon cutting up and

frying this chicken I had brought home from the supermarket a couple of days ago. I know there was only one chicken in the freezer when I left this morning. When I got back this afternoon and sat down at the table, there was a platter full of cut-up fried chicken all right, only there was an additional wing and two too many legs. I haven't seen a chicken yet that could sprout three wings and four legs. Not only that, it didn't taste exactly like the stuff she normally cooks. I figure it was bought from one of those chicken joints. And she never left the house? I checked the freezer and the icebox, but the chicken that had been there was gone. She probably hid it somewhere. I've got to give her credit for having some brains.

"What really makes me mad is she must have brought her lover into our house this time. I have proof. While I was making mental notes to myself this morning, I saw that the matchbook by the big ashtray in the living room had all its matches in it. Now, I'm the only one who smokes in this house, but when I got home from work, five or six of the matches were missing from the book and the burnt remains of those matches were not in the ashtray. In other words, the ashtray had been cleaned so I wouldn't find her boyfriend's cigarette butts, but

I'm too smart for her. I saw the matches.

"Finally, there were the wine glasses. We always keep them in the kitchen cabinet over the sink. We don't have much use for them, so we keep them behind the water tumblers. This afternoon, I found two of the wine glasses in front of the water tumblers. We don't even have any wine in the house. A little thing, but if you pay attention like I do, you notice things like that.

"I put all the clues together and figure it happened this way. After I leave this morning, Audrey drives to her lover's place and picks him up. He brings along a bottle of wine. They use her car because they don't want the neighbors noticing a strange vehicle hanging around my house or driving into my garage. After they get here, she and him go to the bedroom, drink a little wine, and . . . well . . . she's cheating on me, that's all! Then she changes clothes and they come back downstairs and the guy smokes a couple of cigarettes using those matches I planted . . . I mean, I noticed this morning."

"Humph!" interjected Captain Evert.

"It starts getting late," the voice on the tape continued, "and they know I'm going to be home soon, so they hop into her car and pull out of the garage

and into the rain which has since started, thus providing me with another clue: the wet car. You understand?

"After dropping the bum off, she stops by one of those fried chicken outfits and gets a bucket of the stuff. Another mistake. Three wings and four legs in the bucket. Who's she kidding?

"When she gets home, she leaves the car in the garage, puts her wet coat in the closet, and starts trying to cover up what she has done before I arrive. She puts the already-cooked chicken into the frying pan full of oil and turns on the burner, then she gets a bag or something and puts the whole chicken from the freezer, the empty wine bottle, the empty cardboard chicken bucket, and the ashes from the big ashtray into it and hides it somewhere. Next, she washes the wine glasses and mistakenly puts them in front of the water tumblers in the kitchen cabinet. Finally, while she is straightening the upstairs, she hears me drive in and rushes downstairs to make it look like she was in the kitchen cooking, only she doesn't realize she forgot to change out of her skirt and blouse.

"There you have the whole story. Undeniable evidence which I have compiled and analyzed. Proof of my wife's infidelity. If it had happened to

you, I am sure you would have done the same thing I did. I have shot and killed my wife Audrey, and as soon as I have finished this recording, I will turn the gun on myself and take my own li . . ."

At this point, there was a loud, sharp noise on the tape followed by silence.

"Is that all?" asked Captain Evert.

"Yep," replied Mark, switching off the cassette player.

"You mean to tell me because of a few things he couldn't explain around his house," said the captain, "Alvin Mannerly set himself up as judge, jury, and executioner?"

"Looks like it," acknowledged Mark. "But worse, he also played amateur detective. Based on five clues—the wet car and coat, the extra and different tasting poultry pieces, the missing matches, his wife's clothing changes, and the two wine glasses—he created a scenario that was logical but not very probable."

"Sounds like he was not a well man," observed Captain Evert. "Perhaps, if he hadn't committed suicide, he might have gotten help."

"He didn't kill himself. Remember I said the case was a murder and an accidental death."

"Wasn't that sharp noise at the end of the tape Mannerly's

gun going off?"

"Nope," said Mark, shaking his head. "That was the sound of the Mannerly house exploding just before the tape recorder was demolished by the blast. Fortunately, the tape popped free of the machine and survived."

"Blew up? How?"

Mark reached back into the cardboard box he had brought and pulled out some official-looking forms. "It's all here in this fire investigation report, which also provides a logical explanation of each of Alvin Mannerly's five clues."

Captain Evert picked up his glasses from his desk and slipped them on. He took the forms from Mark and started reading.

## **FIRE INVESTIGATION REPORT**

November 8, 1982

Explosion and fire—Mannerly  
residence—116 Westminster  
Drive

REPORTING OFFICER: John  
Lofter, First Company Fire  
Marshal/Investigator

## **BRIEF SUMMARY OF INCIDENT:**

7:01 P.M. Explosion and fire reported at Mannerly residence by Mr. Joseph Wright, 118 Westminster Drive, a next door neighbor of the Mannerlys.

7:18 P.M. No. 4 hose truck and

No. 1 tanker truck from Company 1 arrive at the Mannerly house.

7:23 P.M. Fire extinguished. Two bodies found. One male: apparent victim of the explosion. One female: probable shooting victim. Police notified.

7:35 P.M. Police investigative unit arrives.

7:40 P.M. Departure of Company 1 firefighting equipment.

## **INVESTIGATIVE REPORT:**

Major damage to the two story frame structure occurred during the explosion. The center of the blast was in the area of the kitchen. The subsequent fire was small and confined to a part of the kitchen area. The fire was quickly extinguished by the fire department.

Cause of the blast was an accumulation of gas from a faulty kitchen stove. Helpful information concerning the cause of the explosion was provided by a next door neighbor, Mrs. Emily Wright, who had been in the house a few hours prior to the blast. A transcript of her testimony is included in this report followed by an analysis of her statements as they relate to this investigation.

## **TRANSCRIPT OF TESTIMONY OF MRS. EMILY WRIGHT**

November 8, 1982; 9:10 P.M.

**INTERVIEWING OFFICER:**

John Loftor  
Fire Marshal/Investigator  
First Company

"I went over to the Mannerly house to return some wine glasses I had borrowed and to offer Audrey some extra chicken pieces I had. When I walked into the house, I found her on her hands and knees trying to relight the pilot lights and burners on her stove with some matches. I helped her for a few hours until we finally got the pilots lit; however, the burner on which she was cooking her own chicken plus the extra I gave her kept going out every so often. She certainly does use a lot of oil to fry chicken.

"It started to rain, so I helped her close some of the windows in the house.

"Before Audrey went upstairs to change her clothes—she had gotten quite dirty working on the stove; I always clean my stove every week—anyway, before she went upstairs to change, I asked to borrow her car. You see, our car has been in the shop this week being fixed and Audrey, rest her soul, had lent me her car once before when we were having trouble with ours. I also borrowed one of her coats from the hall closet because of the rain, you understand. I hadn't brought one with me when I came.

"When I got back from the store about a half hour later, I went in to return the coat. Audrey told me the stove had quit working altogether. The chicken she was cooking for dinner that night was only half done so I took it to my house and finished it as best I could. I wasn't about to use that much oil, however. When I took the chicken back to her house, I noticed a faint odor of gas, but I didn't say anything to her because I figured she was trying to relight the stove again. After I left, I saw her husband Alvin come home at around 4:15 P.M.

"At approximately 7:00 P.M., I heard this terrible explosion and looked out of my window and saw their house (Mannerly residence) had blown up. I went over to try and help while my husband Joe called the fire department. When I got there, I smelled the gas and saw the fire. I was frightened so I ran back home. That's all I know."

**ANALYSIS OF INVESTIGATION:**

Failure of the burners on the stove to remain lit indicates probable leakage in the feed lines leading to the burners.

The closing of the windows in the Mannerly home, particularly in the area of the kitchen, significantly increased the rate at which gas accumulated.

Analysis of the faulty stove



parts indicates that Mrs. Mannerly had failed to turn off one of the burners. If the burner had gone out, it is likely an additional amount of gas was collecting in the kitchen.

While it is likely Mr. Alvin Mannerly was the victim of the explosion due to his close proximity to the kitchen, it is the considered opinion of this fire investigator that Mrs. Audrey Mannerly was not the victim of the explosion or the fire. Because of the location of her body away from the blast area and from the nature of her wounds, police investigation is recommended.

"Do you think the explosion was accidental?" asked the captain, handing the papers back to Mark.

"Probably. Alvin had already indicated on the tape that he was going to use a gun to commit suicide—not gas. Anyone trying to blow up the house intentionally or to kill someone with gas from the stove would have turned on all the burners and the oven."

"One thing the fire investigation report does show," said Captain Evert. "Mr. Mannerly had incorrectly interpreted his clues."

"The report offers answers to all of Mr. Mannerly's so-called evidence of his wife's infidelity," the young detective ser-

geant agreed. "The extra chicken and the wine glasses came from a borrowing neighbor. The matches were used to try to relight the stove; the burnt matches were discarded in the kitchen. She changed her clothing because of its being soiled. The car and coat were wet because she lent them to the borrowing neighbor that rainy afternoon. The neighbor had partially cooked the chicken in a manner somewhat different from the way Mrs. Mannerly would have, thus contributing to its different taste. Yeah, it would appear that everything adds up."

"Apparently Mrs. Mannerly was telling her husband the truth all along," observed Captain Evert. "But in his sick mind, he exaggerated the facts he had learned and killed his wife and nearly succeeded in killing himself, except that the gas explosion did the second job for him."

"So we seem to have a logical conclusion to the Mannerly case. Only one problem," said Mark.

"What's that?"

"Why are there so many pages left in this story?"

"Beg your pardon?"

Mark laughed. "If you were an avid mystery reader like myself, you would understand. You'd be reading right along and, all of a sudden, you reach a logical conclusion. All the

questions have been answered, all the good guys and bad guys have been determined, and the mystery appears to be solved. Yet when you look ahead to see how many pages are left, you find several. 'Why are there so many pages left in this story?' is another way of telling you that the mystery isn't finished and there's more to tell."

"What more can there be?" asked Captain Evert.

The detective picked up the box from the chair and set it on the captain's desk. Inside the box was a bulging brown paper shopping bag.

"What's in it?" asked the captain.

"One whole chicken, one empty wine bottle, discarded material from a cigarette ash-tray, and one cardboard bucket from Annie's Insta-Chicken."

"Huh?"

Mark reached into his pocket and pulled out a smaller bag. He handed it to the somewhat confused captain. "And this is what put me on to it."

The captain opened the small bag and looked inside. "Bones," he announced, flatly.

"Right!" said Mark. "Chicken bones, to be more specific."

"You mean to tell me Alvin Mannerly was right in his little novice investigation after all? What about the testimony of Mrs. Wright?"

"It's past quitting time," said

Mark, looking at his watch. "If you'll buy me a beer at Kelly's, I'll explain the whole thing."

"I'll buy you a six pack, but what . . ."

"Come on." Mark collected all his items and returned them to the box. "Let's stop by the refrigerator and drop this bird off so it doesn't go bad, then we'll go to Kelly's and hoist a few."

Captain Evert looked at the young detective with the soiled clothing and the shiner. He wasn't sure he wanted to be seen in public with this walking disaster, but it was either that or not find out what really happened in the Mannerly case. He chose the former.

They walked the half block down to Kelly's Bar. The place was crowded with other people who had just gotten off work, but Mark managed to find an empty table in the back while Captain Evert ordered.

"Okay," said the captain, arriving at the table with the beers. "Give."

"Wait a minute," said Mark, lifting the mug and downing half its contents. Captain Evert sighed a deep, impatient sigh.

"Doesn't it bother you that Mrs. Wright's testimony to the fire marshal offered all the answers necessary to refute Alvin Mannerly's allegations against his wife?" began Mark after he set the mug down.

"Maybe . . . I see what you mean."

"Like any good detective, I had to check out all possible leads, even if those leads were refuted by someone's impartial testimony. I decided to start with Mr. Mannerly's suspicion that his wife had bought a bucket of chicken instead of cutting up and cooking the whole one he had brought home earlier. That's where those bones you saw come in."

"The chicken bones," said Captain Evert.

"Right. You see, my wife is always buying that precooked chicken from those little fast-food places because she knows there are some pieces of chicken I just won't eat. You know, the back, the neck, those sorts of things; the pieces you get when you buy a supermarket chicken and cook it yourself. Nearly all those precooked-chicken places, including Annie's, don't put parts like that in their mixed buckets. If Mrs. Mannerly did cut up and cook the whole chicken from the refrigerator, those parts had to be somewhere in the Mannerly kitchen."

"What about the fire and explosion?"

"Like the fire investigator indicated, the fire was small and not very intense. It was hot enough to burn paper and blister paint, but not hot enough to destroy chicken bones. Mrs.

Mannerly might have put the neck and the back in the refrigerator or she might have thrown them away like my wife would have done. Alvin Mannerly never acknowledged the presence or absence of those parts from his platter of fried chicken, so, like me, he probably doesn't eat them.

"The contents of the refrigerator were intact, but unfortunately I didn't find the neck or back there, which meant the only other place they could be was in the kitchen garbage. Problem was, the explosion blew the contents of the garbage pail all over the kitchen, so I had to search for the bones."

Captain Evert tried to picture this tall, lanky detective crawling among the rubble and trash on his hands and knees, collecting chicken bones. "What did you find?"

"It's what I didn't find," corrected Mark. "No backbones or neckbones. The chicken had to come from a fast-food chicken restaurant. I checked the phone book and the closest restaurant of that type is Annie's Insta-Chicken, exactly four miles away. Remember what Alvin Mannerly had said on the tape. His wife's car had been driven eight miles that day — or four miles each way."

"What about Mannerly's contention that his wife picked up her lover?"

"The mileage wouldn't have added up unless her lover lived along the route to Annie's place," replied Mark. "A more likely possibility was that her lover lived within walking distance of the Mannerly home. It would have to be someone who, if observed walking into the Mannerly house, would not arouse undue suspicion among the neighbors. We're getting away from the main point, however."

"Which is?"

"Since Audrey Mannerly lied to her husband about cutting up and frying the chicken from the refrigerator," said Mark, shaking his finger, "Emily Wright had to have lied to the fire investigator about finishing the chicken in her own kitchen."

"Why would she do that?"

"For the same reason she had to disprove all the evidence Mr. Mannerly had compiled. She didn't want anyone investigating the possibility that Mrs. Mannerly had a lover."

"How could she possibly know what evidence she had to disprove?"

"Elementary, my dear captain," said Mark. "She listened to the tape. While her husband phoned the fire department, Mrs. Wright ran over to the Mannerly house after the explosion to try to help. Instead, she found Audrey Mannerly shot to death and the body of

Mr. Mannerly lying on the floor of the living room along with the gun, the smashed tape recorder, and the cassette tape. Figuring there might be information on the tape that would help in the investigation of the shooting death of Mrs. Mannerly, she rescued it for the police. The only problem was, when she returned to her own house, she played the tape back on her own cassette player. She already had her suspicions, but when she heard the tape, she put two and two together and realized who Audrey Mannerly's secret lover was."

"But the tape was found in the living room with Mannerly's body," observed the captain.

"Of course," replied Mark. "Mrs. Wright knew the police would expect to find a tape near the smashed recorder along with the gun and the body. She also knew that if the police launched a thorough investigation because of a missing suicide or confession tape, they might discover who Audrey Mannerly's lover was. Suddenly she realized how she could use the tape to her advantage. The tape made Alvin Mannerly sound like a nut case already. All she had to do was come up with a story that would disprove his evidence. The police, then, couldn't help but believe that his clues were the products of a deranged

mind. The result would be no investigation into the secret lover theory. She knew she had to get the tape back into the living room with the smashed recorder, but that presented no problem. From the time she listened to the tape, probably about seven ten P.M. or seven fifteen or so, she had twenty, maybe twenty-five minutes to get the tape into the room. All she had to do was toss it through the blown-out window before the investigation team arrived."

"Okay, but why did she do it?" asked the captain.

"Because she didn't want anyone to find out that the lover was her husband, Joseph Wright. She was trying to protect him in spite of his actions, but it was the discovery of the bag containing all the stuff supporting Alvin Mannerly's theories that helped me piece together what she was up to."

"And where, may I ask, did you find the bag?"

"I found it in the Wrights' outside trash can, just where Joseph Wright stuck it when he sneaked back to his own house after his interlude with Mrs. Mannerly. The same place Emily Wright saw him put it. Later she went out to compare its contents with what the Mannerly tape had said would probably be in it. The same place I just

barely managed to get to before the sanitation truck emptied the can."

"So that's how you got the black eye," snickered Captain Evert.

"I had no idea those guys were so possessive of their trash," said Mark, touching the corner of the eye again.

"I suppose Mrs. Wright knew about the problems with the stove from some earlier conversation with Mrs. Mannerly," observed the captain.

"No doubt."

Mark paused a moment to down the remainder of his beer. "I've already learned from the fellows in the lab that the fingerprints of Audrey Mannerly, Joseph Wright, and Emily Wright are all over the empty wine bottle. . . . Say, do you think that dust they use for fingerprints will ruin that chicken? It just doesn't make good sense to waste a perfectly good . . ."

Captain Evert cracked up. "Come on, you know you can't get fingerprints off a chicken," he roared.

"That's right. They have claws," said Mark, starting his own laugh.

And Captain Evert realized he had been the victim of one of the most insidious creations of western civilization: the chicken joke.

# CASES ON FILE

## A Renaissance Murder

by David Braly



**T**he pestilence had passed, the floodwaters had receded, and the foreign army had withdrawn, but nevertheless an eerie sense of foreboding pervaded Rome that warm Wednesday of June 14, 1497. In the basilica near the ruins of the old medieval church of St.-Peter's-by-the-Vatican there were odd, unexplained noises, and it was widely reported that torches had been seen dancing in the air. Only later did the shocked populace learn that the night of that day was stained by a crime involving twenty-two-year-old Don Juan Francisco de Borgia, Duke of Gandia, Prince of Teano and Tricarico, Count of Carinola

and Claramonte, Tyrant of Benevento, Terracina, and Pontecorvo, Grand Constable of Naples, Gonfalonier of the Church, and favorite son of the pope.

Don Juan had become lord of the rich Spanish duchy of Gandia when he was only twelve, upon the death of his elder brother Pier Luigi, who had received it from Ferdinand and Isabella partly in recognition of his military services against the Moors and partly because of a large sum of money paid them by Cardinal Rodigo Borgia, the future Pope Alexander VI and head of the Spanish noble house of Borgia. Rodigo was elected pope in 1492, and the

following year his son, the young Duke of Gandia, was married to Maria Enriquez de Luna, first cousin of King Ferdinand. By her the duke eventually had a son and a daughter, although he was accused of being more interested in spending his time hunting, gambling, carousing with women of the street, and killing stray animals in the alleys of Barcelona than he was in enjoying the company of his wife.

The duke spent lavishly on clothes and jewelry and had more than a hundred caballeros in his service. He did, however, show talent as a commander in the Spanish service, and so, in 1496, his father summoned him to Rome to lead the Borgia battle against the powerful Orsini family and its many partisans.

Bitter and deep was the hatred of the Borgias for the Orsini. They remembered how the Orsini had risen in 1458 upon the death of the first Borgia pope, Callixtus III, to direct the slaughter of the family's Spanish hangers-on and the manhunt for the commander of the papal army, Cardinal Rodigo's own brother, who managed to buy off his relentless pursuers shortly before his death from fever. Recently King Charles VIII of France had invaded Italy to claim the throne of Naples, and it was no secret that

he also planned to depose Alexander. The Orsini had gone into his service as *condottieri* (mercenaries). Because of Orsini help the French had been able to reach, plunder, and rape Naples, retreating only before the threat of insurrection from the outraged Neapolitans, a foreign alliance's threat to France itself, and the reality of history's first record of syphilis, which struck down almost the entire army. Even after the main force of the French had departed, the Orsini continued to help the garrisons left behind. Alexander had furiously denounced them, and finally, in 1496, he declared them rebels, and confiscated—on paper—all their very extensive lands and properties.

But because declaring a powerful clan dispossessed was something short of actually dispossessing them, the pope sent to Spain for his son, the Duke of Gandia.

The duke, clad in a bejeweled surcoat of the finest velvet, rode into Rome at the head of a pompous parade in August, 1496. What he found there was a city that was only just beginning to enter the Renaissance. It was the center of Europe's religious life, yet it was also a turbulent place of lawlessness and sin. Rome lost an incredible tenth of its population to mur-



der each year, and more than a quarter of its fifty thousand inhabitants were either professional thieves or prostitutes. Robbery, adultery, and pornography abounded, and were no little reason for northern Europe's growing contempt for the "holy city." Mobs, often instigated by the powerful Orsini or Colonna families, occasionally determined the election of a pope by their rioting. And, although the Renaissance had arrived, although new construction was underway, generally Rome was a city of ruins, where all the glory reposed in the past.

Pope Alexander appointed his son commander-in-chief of the papal armies, and instructed him to dispossess the Orsini and drive out the French who still remained in central Italy, an area over which the church claimed political as well as religious authority. The son did his best to obey. One Orsini stronghold after another fell to the furious assaults of the Duke of Gandia until it appeared that the entire clan would be ruined. But then, in the Sabatini mountains about twenty-five miles northwest of Rome, he was stopped. The Orsini held the great walled city of Bracciano above the lake of the same name, and there they held out against his assaults. The duke

pounded at the walls week after week, until finally King Charles paid other armed forces within Italy to go to the Orsini's aid. The duke was compelled to lift the siege and was routed in battle. The Orsini then marched upon Rome, where the pope sued for peace. He was forced to restore to the Orsini most of the fortresses captured from them by his son.

The duke's military reputation was not badly hurt. He was still regarded with hatred and fear by the Orsini, who could expect him to be back at their throats sometime soon. For the moment, the duke occupied himself in capturing Ostia fourteen miles southwest of Rome, an ancient city with an important bishopric that was still occupied by a French garrison. Actually it was a Spanish captain, Gonsalvo de Cordova, who took Ostia and thereby liberated a large amount of territory that was hostile, but the duke shared in the credit, whether he deserved to or not. That may have alerted the Orsini that the young man was still a formidable enemy.

The white-hot hatred of the Orsini probably did not greatly disturb the young Borgia. He acquired enemies with the ease most men acquire debts. There was, for example, his bitter dispute with his sister's husband,

Count Giovanni Sforza. The young count was angry at all of his in-laws, who were charging publicly that he was impotent, hoping to get him out of their family by annulment and in the bargain to get back Lucrezia's dowry. When the count killed a friend of the duke's to spite him, the duke responded by lynching several of the count's men from the battlements of a castle. The count's cousin, Cardinal Ascanio Maria Sforza-Visconti, was likewise outraged and, always an enemy of the Borgias anyway, was especially hostile to the duke. The Duke of Urbino was also rumored to be hostile. Urbino had been Gandia's second-in-command during the campaign against the Orsini, but when he was captured, the Borgias had refused to pay his ransom, a sum that would have been easy for them to raise but terribly difficult for him. Even the Duke of Gandia's own brother, sixteen-year-old Goffredo Borgia, was said to hate him because of Gandia's affair with the youth's wife.

Yes, by June 7, 1497, the twenty-two-year-old Duke of Gandia had made many enemies.

That evening the duke went across to the east bank of the Tiber to a guarded villa near the church of San Pietro-in-

Vincoli amid the ruins of the ancient city. It was the house of his mother, Madonna Giovanna de Catanei, and he went there to dine with other members of the family. Lucrezia was absent, but Goffredo was there with his wife, as was another brother of the duke, twenty-three-year-old Cardinal Cesare Borgia. They dined in the garden, and it was there a masked man was shown in while they were eating. He whispered something to the duke, then left. The duke did not explain, nor did anyone ask him to. Wearing a mask was a common practice at that time, and this particular individual had been seen with the duke at the Vatican almost every day for several weeks. No one knew his name, nor what he looked like behind the mask, and that was presumably exactly how the duke wanted it.

Darkness fell, and Cesare told his brother that it was time they returned to the Vatican. Together they took leave of their mother, mounted their horses, and rode with a small escort through the streets toward the Palazzo Cesarini, where Cardinal Ascanio Maria Sforza-Visconti lived. On the way they came upon the same masked man who had appeared during dinner, obviously waiting there for the duke. The

masked man joined the escort. Soon they arrived on the Banchi Vecchi beneath the Palazzo Cesarini, one of the last major buildings on the east bank below the bridges that crossed the Tiber to Castel Sant' Angelo, the fortress guarding the approach to the Vatican. There, the duke told everyone except his groom and two of his attendants to ride on, that he wanted to amuse himself, presumably with one or more of his women friends. He instructed his groom to go to the duke's own palazzo for some weapons and meet him later in the Piazza Giudea, a square in the Jewish quarter. When the others in the party warned him against going off by himself, he shrugged and waved goodbye. Then he pulled the masked man up behind him and rode off.

The duke did not return that night to the Vatican, nor did he appear at his palazzo. No one was worried, it being presumed that he was with a woman.

The following morning a man was found on the ground in the Piazza Giudea, wounded by a dagger. He was discovered to be the duke's groom. Efforts to get him to talk failed; he died without revealing what had happened. Some of the pope's armed men found the duke's horse, its stirrups in disarray.

The pope, terrified that his

favorite son might be the victim of a crime, ordered an immediate inquiry and a thorough police search of the area. He was probably especially alarmed that the area around the Palazzo Cesarini, where his son had last been seen, and the Jewish quarter, to which he had been bound, were both dominated by the Orsini. Indeed, the Orsini had five fortresses in those sections, as well as a palazzo and several private torture chambers and prisons.

Among the men to come forward with information was a boatman who told a strange story. On the night the duke disappeared, he said, he had been near the Tiber, guarding his boat, which was beached on the bank. While hidden in its shadow he had seen four men go down to the river and try to ascertain if anyone was near. Once they were satisfied no one was, a man came forth upon a white horse, accompanied by two other men. Another man lay across the horse behind the rider. The pair who had accompanied the horseman dumped this apparently unconscious person into the Tiber. The rider ordered them to throw rocks and sink the victim's cloak, which had risen to the water's surface and floated there. The boatman said he had not come forward earlier because he had

seen thousands of such incidents at night and they had never been of interest to anyone before.

The pope sent three hundred men to drag the Tiber. A fisherman's net drew up the duke's body in the early afternoon of June 16th, across from a villa of Cardinal Ascanio Sforza-Visconti. The duke's hands were bound together, his body bore between nine and fourteen dagger wounds, and his throat had been cut. He was still elegantly attired, his dagger and gloves in place, and his jeweled pouch held a large amount of money. Obviously robbery could immediately be ruled out as the motive for his murder.

On the way from Castèl Sant'Angelo, where the corpse was washed and prepared for the funeral, to the church of Santa Maria del Popolo, where it was interred, the Borgia partisans stopped at the river bank where the fisherman's net had fetched up the body and swore with their swords held high that they would avenge his death by a vendetta.

But a vendetta against whom?

Popular suspicion fell upon Cardinal Ascanio Sforza-Visconti. Only a few days before the murder, he had had a violent quarrel with the duke during a banquet. The cardinal fled his palazzo shortly before a mob

of Borgia partisans broke in, looted it, and smashed everything they couldn't carry away.

Spanish soldiers conducted a house-to-house search along the Tiber. The police interrogated every suspicious person and did it using the rack. Informers were sought out. But the authorities could find no suspects, no leads, even though nothing was overlooked. Every clue was sought in an age unfamiliar with looking for them, but there were none that could be found.

And so who had killed the pope's son?

Alexander declared his belief that Cardinal Ascanio Sforza-Visconti, the Duke of Urbino, and sixteen-year-old Goffredo Borgia were all innocent. He was also sure that his son-in-law Giovanni Sforza had no hand in it. The pope's own suspicions fell upon two groups: the duke's mistresses, and the Orsini.

The mistresses were interrogated and released. Innocent.

That left the Orsini, the powerful family in whose territory the duke had been murdered, who had suffered mightily at his hands, and who could have expected to suffer worse in the future from him. But less than a year passed before a new flame was being discussed as a suspect: Cesare Borgia. That young man had promptly shed

his cardinal's robes after the murder to take up the sword, replacing the duke as head of the Borgias' temporal interests. Although he had been in the Vatican that night, rumor declared that he had arranged for his brother's assassination in order to take his place as commander of the papal army. Absurd as the charge was, the enemies of the Borgias (and they were legion) wanted to believe it and even convinced themselves that it was true. The duke's widow was counted among the believers. Others did not believe, but as enemies of the Borgias they spread the tale anyway.

There were reports that the pope came to suspect Cardinal Ascanio Sforza-Visconti again, but certainly his earliest suspicions were directed against the Orsini.

Speculation about the duke's murder occupied the time of the common folk and the powerful nobles of Renaissance Italy for a long, long time. Candidates for murderer were discussed throughout Europe. Inns were filled with talk about it, diplo-

matic mail with letters about it. Maybe, they said, it was Cardinal Sforza-Visconti, who left Rome after suspicion fell upon him again. Perhaps his cousin Giovanni Sforza, who soon agreed, reluctantly, to the annulment of his marriage to the young and very beautiful Lucrezia Borgia. Or any of the other suspects. Or none of them, but rather a man the duke had angered but whom the other Borgias and their contemporaries knew nothing of. And what about the man in the mask? Had he been a victim of the assassins—or one of them?

Pope Alexander believed that the Orsini had murdered the duke. If the Orsini had, they had made a disastrous blunder. True, the duke had defeated them often, but in the end they had beaten him. After his murder Cesare Borgia took the duke's place. And *he* almost exterminated the Orsini completely.

To this day, however, the murderers of Don Juan Francisco de Borgia, Duke of Gandia and son of the pope, remain a mystery.

# BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



**L**ike a fair number of other excellent mystery writers, Dorothy Dunnett is female, hails from Great Britain (Scotland specifically), and deserves to be widely read. Like the best of her breed, she also stands alone; her five novels featuring a myopic portrait painter with the unlikely name of Johnson Johnson are very special.

Johnson Johnson appears in each book with his private yacht *Dolly*. It's described by one of the female protagonists thus: "I thought I knew what to expect, but it wasn't the fifty-six feet of white topside; the tailored teak of the deck with its

brass sparkling; the pale soaring poles of her masts. Graceful, orderly and implicitly workmanlike." *Dolly's* owner, on the other hand, is in early middle age, is usually dressed in baggy trousers, is masked by pop-bottle bifocals, and is topped by an untidy thatch of black hair. He is wealthy from the fees he receives for his portraits, and he is in great demand as a painter. Because all the beautiful people wish him to do their portraits, he is—in spite of his unimpressive appearance and his eccentric independence—in great demand at parties and assorted fetes. Thus readers who follow John-

son's escapades are taken to a number of exotic locales: Nassau and the blue waters of the Bahamas; Edinburgh, and a subsequent boat race through the Hebrides; the Manitoba wastelands; the swank brownstones of New York City; the coast of Yugoslavia; the sunny village of Ibiza, Spain, during Eastertide. There are embassy parties, star-gazing sessions at an Italian observatory, and chase scenes—wonderful, zany chase scenes—through storms at sea, through the Italian countryside in a vendor's truck brimming with explosive gas-filled balloons, and even through a Disney-like amusement park in New Jersey.

But Dorothy Dunnett's idiosyncratic way of telling a tale seems to have rubbed off on me. Let me begin at the beginning. There are, to date, five Johnson novels; their U.S. titles are *Dolly and the Singing Bird* (1968); *Dolly and the Cookie Bird* (1970); *Dolly and the Doctor Bird* (1971); *Dolly and the Starry Bird* (1973); and *Dolly and the Nanny Bird* (1976). Four of the five are available now in Vintage Books paperbacks, a bargain at \$2.95 each. The fifth was recently released in hardcover by Alfred A. Knopf at \$12.95.

I've explained who *Dolly* is; let me tell you about the "birds."

Each novel is narrated by a different female protagonist, one to a book. Each of the young women, who are all intelligent and beautiful and witty, is identified according to her career: thus, the "Starry Bird" is a world-famous coloratura, while the "Cookie Bird" is the daughter of an indigent British lord who has recently trained at a school for chefs. Each of these women runs into Johnson and becomes involved in one of his operations. For Johnson, you see, is a free-lance agent for British Intelligence, a trouble-shooter with a very un-departmentlike way of conducting espionage affairs. And each of the women responds in her own way to Johnson and his absurd world, although they share a breathtakingly fresh eye and a highly developed sense of satire with their creator. To read the exploits of Ms. Dunnett's "birds" is to laugh aloud at their trials and tribulations, all variations of the time-honored "Perils of Pauline."

Dorothy Dunnett does, however, have her own unusual way of putting things which occasionally requires one to reread whole passages. I bought the newest book not long ago, and the sales clerk said enthusiastically, "Don't you just love Johnson Johnson?" I nodded, intent on locating the correct



coins from the bottom of my tote, where they had—naturally—sunk. “Of course,” the woman went on as she paper-bagged my purchase, “it took me one or two books before I could figure out what they were talking about. After that, it was smooth sailing. I love Dorothy Dunnett.”

Let me give you a few examples.

From *Dolly and the Starry Bird*: “Pebble glasses (Professor Hathaway) met bifocal lenses (Johnson) in a reciprocal explosion of light. She said, ‘You disconnected Innes’ power. You switched it off and examined his machinery.’

“‘We all did it,’ said Jacko unexpectedly. I didn’t think he had it in him; it must have been that long talk with Johnson. Live with wool and feel that little bit richer.”

See what I mean? The last sentence, for instance, is probably a popular ad slogan—in *England*.

The *Starry Bird* isn’t the only one with a sense of humor. *Cookie Bird* Sarah Cassells describes her mother, a well-preserved Mata Hari, in action: “Mummy smiled silently into his eyes, bridging the generation gap like a harpoon from a whaleboat.” Or here’s the *Nanny Bird* confiding in the reader: “I tell you, my private life and my career both sure as death

were designed by a plumber.” Or the *Doctor Bird*, a serious-minded physician who is determined to be a spinster: “My mother died at my birth, a woman of limited impact, leaving me the only offspring and heir to a madman.” The *Singing Bird*—even in the middle of a yacht race—is always dressed extravagantly, as in her “cire rainsuit lined with lynx fur,” so suitable for bad weather; and the *Starry Bird* describes a nubile young jetsetter as appearing in “a jersey slit to the navel . . . like a popped pod all ready for Birdseye.” Although Johnson Johnson is the series character, he appears as a background character to tantalize the reader; I couldn’t get enough of him. But these five novels are also to be cherished for the five “birds,” each different from the other and yet equally entertaining.

Don’t think of these novels as simply silly or facetious, for there’s mystery and adventure galore, from kidnapping to terrorism, blackmail to plain old murder. There’s danger everywhere: on the high seas, in the bowels of an electronic castle behind the Iron Curtain, in a chic gallery of pop art. And aside from Johnson and his current “bird,” there are plenty of other assorted eccentrics and villains: an aging queen of a cosmetics dynasty, a handsome

playboy and prodigal son of English nobility, a genius astronomer who keeps a pet mouse, and the forty-fifth Chief of Clan Rannoch and Keeper of Rannoch Castle, to name but a few. Read Dorothy Dunnett's

Johnson Johnson mysteries and enter a brave new world, one that vies with any that Lewis Carroll devised. It drives some people wild, such as the mouse-keeping astronomer, but I found it madcap entertainment.

## MYSTERY REVIEWS

Chief Superintendent George Gently makes a comeback in Alan Hunter's **Gently Between Tides**. Gently's new wife is out of England, and he's planning to use the time to make some repairs in their home, but there's no rest for the wicked; instead he has to "assist" the local man in a murder investigation in a nearby village in a way that will not bruise the man's ego, nor step on any local V.I.P. toes. True to his surname, Gently quietly and methodically upturns chapter, then verse, in the solitary life of the young strangled girl. As he begins to know her, his list of suspects grows, for Hannah Stoven was one of those rare creatures who inspired confidences—and who attracted, without intending it, trouble. Strong characters propel this simple tale to its surprising conclusion. (Walker and Company, \$11.95, 181 pp.)

Not everyone will appreciate Michael Kurland's **Death by Gaslight** (Signet, \$3.50, 279 pp.) because his protagonist is none other than Professor Moriarty, the arch-enemy of our beloved Sherlock Holmes. Aside from the sneering at Holmes, however, there's much to enjoy in this very period tale of mass slashings and a mysterious killer who apparently enters and leaves from locked rooms. Holmes is naturally on the case, and although Moriarty has his hands full planning a bold robbery of a treasure train, he too turns his eye to the slasher when he's appealed to by a deputation of petty underworldlings (headed by none other than Colonel Moran). The language, the background, and even the melodramatic nature of the plot (replete with dark secrets, white slavery, and other period trappings) are very Victorian, and ultimately lots of fun. This isn't for purists or Baker Street Irregulars, for reverence for the Master just isn't to be found in a novel starring Moriarty. But for the rest of us, there's a strong tale with lots of Sherlockian frills and a pretty hair-raising plot.

The Dell Scene of the Crime series has recently published Gwendoline Butler's 1970 novel, **A Coffin from the Past**. There's mur-

der here all right, but the Coffin in the title refers to British detective John Coffin, the investigator in the brutal shooting of a young London M.P. and his pretty secretary. To muddy the waters—and the slayings are already confusing—the man's cool, estranged wife returns from America. Crossing her path are a seedy private investigator, a young political worker and friend of her late husband's, and a retired vaudevillian ventriloquist who seems to be going round the bend. There are further attacks, each dangerous and insidious, before Coffin gets to the bottom of things; and only the reader knows he's not touched bottom yet, and probably never will. This is spooky and full of thrills, as Butler weaves into her contemporary tale the threads of a Victorian mass-murder that took place long ago in the same brownstone. Very compelling and atmospheric, *A Coffin from the Past* deserves its new life in paperback.

**Whoever I Am** is the problem posed by British actress Christine Markham, and a suitable title for Eileen Dewhurst's latest psychological thriller. (Doubleday Crime Club, \$11.95, 188 pp.) Christine is recently divorced from what she considered a very happy marriage, and so she's easily recruited by British Intelligence to infiltrate a nursing home which she's told is housing a spy. Her job is to stay in her role (a young, mentally ill woman who wanders aimlessly) and report back all she sees. It's difficult enough as it is, without her falling in love with her "control"—and then finding evidence that points toward him as the enemy. The portrait of an actress whose very life hangs on her credibility—even under the stress of doubts as to who is deceiving whom—is convincing, and very gripping.

Eric Ward is an ex-cop whose bout with chronic glaucoma is threatening his new career, that of a British solicitor, and his chances for happiness with the young woman he loves. Thus Roy Lewis has devised a serious backdrop for his protagonist's investigation into a powerful family's legal quarrels that leads to his client's murder. The selfish and vengeful maneuvers of the family members make a striking contrast to the somber personal problems Ward can catalog. This isn't cheerful, but **Dwell in Danger** is tough and realistic and even touching. (St. Martin's Press, \$10.95, 186 pp.)

# THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



Arthur Tress / Magnum

Sailing away, or run aground? Why? Is the ship coming to the rescue? Or not? We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, Box 200, 380 Lexington Avenue, N.Y., N.Y. 10017.

The winning entry for the December Mysterious Photograph will be found on page 155.

FICTION

# The Right To Sing the Blues

by John Lutz



“**T**here’s this that you need to know about jazz,” Fat Jack McGee told Nudger with a smile. “You don’t need to know a thing about it to enjoy it, and that’s all you need to know.” He tossed back his huge head, jowls quivering, and drained the final sip of brandy from his crystal snifter. “It’s feel.” He used a white

napkin to dab at his lips with a very fat man’s peculiar delicacy. “Jazz is pure feel.”

“Does Willy Hollister have the feel?” Nudger asked. He pushed his plate away, feeling full to the point of being bloated. The only portion of the gourmet lunch Fat Jack had bought him that remained untouched was the grits.

"Willy Hollister," Fat Jack said, with something like reverence, "plays ultra-fine piano."

A white-vested waiter appeared like a native from around a potted palm, carrying chicory coffee on a silver tray, and placed cups before Nudger and Fat Jack. "Then what's your problem with Hollister?" Nudger asked, sipping the thick rich brew. He rated it delicious. "Didn't you hire him to play his best piano at your club?"

"Hey, there's no problem with his music," Fat Jack said. "But first, Nudger, I gotta know if you can hang around New Orleans till you can clear up this matter." Fat Jack's tiny pinkish eyes glittered with mean humor. "For a fat fee, of course."

Nudger knew the fee would be adequate. Fat Jack had a bank account as obese as his body, and he had, in fact, paid Nudger a sizable sum just to travel to New Orleans and sit in the Magnolia Blossom restaurant over lunch and listen while Fat Jack talked. The question Nudger now voiced was: "Why me?"

"Because I know a lady from your fair city." Fat Jack mentioned a name. "She says you're tops at your job; she don't say that about many."

"... And because of your collection," Fat Jack added. An ebony dribble of coffee dangled in liquid suspension from his

triple chin, glittering as he talked. "I hear you collect old jazz records."

"I used to," Nudger said a bit wistfully. "I had Willie the Lion. Duke Ellington and Mary Ann Williams from their Kansas City days."

"How come had?" Fat Jack asked.

"I sold the collection," Nudger said. "To pay the rent one dark month." He gazed beyond green palm fronds, out the window and through filigreed black wrought iron, at the tourists half a block away on Bourbon Street, at the odd combination of French and Spanish architecture and black America and white suits and broiling half-tropical sun that was New Orleans, where jazz lived as in no other place. "Damned rent," he muttered.

"Amen." Fat Jack was kidding not even himself. He hadn't worried about paying the rent in years. The drop of coffee released its grip on his chin, plummeted, and stained his white shirtfront. "So will you stay around town a while?"

Nudger nodded. His social and business calendars weren't exactly booked solid.

"Hey, it's not Hollister himself who worries me," Fat Jack said, "it's Ineida Collins. She's singing at the club now, and if she keeps practicing, someday she'll be mediocre. I'm not dig-

ging at her, Nudger; that's an honest assessment."

"Then why did you hire her?"

"Because of David Collins. He owns a lot of the French Quarter. He owns a piece of the highly successful restaurant where we now sit. In every parish in New Orleans, he has more clout than a ton of charge cards. And he's as skinny and ornery as I am fat and nice."

Nudger took another sip of coffee.

"And he asked you to hire Ineida Collins?"

"You're onto it. Ineida is his daughter. She wants to make it as a singer. And she will, if Dad has to buy her a recording studio, at double the fair price. Since David Collins also owns the building my club is in, I thought I'd acquiesce when his daughter auditioned for a job. And Ineida isn't really so bad that she embarrasses anyone but herself. I call it diplomacy."

"I thought you were calling it trouble," Nudger said. "I thought that was why you hired me."

Fat Jack nodded, ample jowls spilling over his white collar. "So it became," he said. "Hollister, you see, is a handsome young dude, and within the first week Ineida was at the club, he put some moves on her. They became fast friends. They've now progressed beyond mere friendship."

"You figure he's attracted to Dad's money?"

"Nothing like that," Fat Jack said. "When I hired Ineida, David Collins insisted I keep her identity a secret. It was part of the deal. So she sings under the stage name Ineida Mann, which most likely is a gem from her dad's advertising department."

"I still don't see your problem," Nudger said.

"Hollister doesn't set right with me, and I don't know exactly why. I do know that if he messes up Ineida in some way, David Collins will see to it that I'm playing jazz on the Butte-Boise-Anchorage circuit."

"Nice cities," Nudger remarked, "but not jazz towns. I see your problem."

"So find out about Willy Hollister for me," Fat Jack implored. "Check him out, declare him pass or fail, but put my mind at ease either way. That's all I want, an easeful mind."

"Even we tough private eye guys want that," Nudger said.

Fat Jack removed his napkin from his lap and raised a languid plump hand. A waiter who had been born just to respond to that signal scampered over with the check. Fat Jack accepted a tiny ballpoint pen and signed with a ponderous yet elegant flourish. Nudger watched him help himself to a mint. It was like watching the grace



and dexterity of an elephant picking up a peanut. Huge as Fat Jack was, he moved as if he weighed no more than ten or twelve pounds.

"I gotta get back, Nudger. Do some paperwork, count some money." He stood up, surprisingly tall in his tan slacks and white linen sport coat. Nudger thought it was a neat coat; he decided he might buy one and wear it winter and summer. "Drop around the club about eight o'clock tonight," Fat Jack said. "I'll fill you in on whatever else you need to know, and I'll show you Willy Hollister and Ineida. Maybe you'll get to hear her sing."

"While she's singing," Nudger said, "maybe we can discuss my fee."

Fat Jack grinned, his vast jowls defying gravity grandly. "Hey, you and me're gonna get along fine." He winked and moved away among the tables, tacking toward the door, dwarfing the other diners.

The waiter refilled Nudger's coffee cup. He sat sipping chicory brew and watching Fat Jack McGee walk down the sunny sidewalk toward Bourbon Street. He sure had a jaunty, bouncy kind of walk for a fat man.

Nudger wasn't as anxious about the fee as Fat Jack thought, though the subject was of more than passing interest.

Actually, he had readily taken the case because years ago, at a club in St. Louis, he'd heard Fat Jack McGee play clarinet in the manner that had made him something of a jazz legend, and he'd never forgotten. Real jazz fans are hooked forever.

He needed to hear that clarinet again.

**F**at Jack's club was on Dexter, half a block off Bourbon Street. Nudger paused at the entrance and looked up at its red and green neon sign. There was a red neon Fat Jack himself, a portly, herky-jerky, illuminated figure that jumped about with the same seeming lightness and jauntiness as the real Fat Jack.

Trumpet music from inside the club was wafting out almost palpably into the hot humid night. People were coming and going, among them a few obvious tourists, making the Bourbon Street rounds. But Nudger got the impression that most of Fat Jack's customers were folks who took their jazz seriously and were there for music, not atmosphere.

The trumpet stairstepped up to an admirable high C and wild applause. Nudger went inside and looked around. Dim, smoky, lots of people at lots of tables, men in suits and in jeans and T-shirts, women in long

dressess and in casual slacks. The small stage was empty now; the band was between sets. Customers were milling around, stacking up at the bar along one wall. Waitresses in "Fat Jack's" T-shirts were bustling about with trays of drinks. Near the left of the stage was a polished, dark, upright piano that gleamed like a new car even in the dimness. Fat Jack's was everything a jazz club should be, Nudger decided.

Feeling at home, he made his way to the bar and after a five-minute wait ordered a mug of draft beer. The mug was frosted, the beer ice-flecked.

The lights brightened and dimmed three times, apparently a signal the regulars at Fat Jack's understood, for they began a general movement back toward their tables. Then the lights dimmed considerably, and the stage, with its gleaming piano, was suddenly the only illuminated area in the place. A tall, graceful man in his early thirties walked onstage to the kind of scattered but enthusiastic applause that suggests respect and a common bond between performer and audience. The man smiled faintly at the applause and sat down at the piano. He had pained, haughty features, and blond hair that curled above the collar of his black Fat Jack's shirt. The muscles in his bare arms were

corded; his hands appeared elegant yet very strong. He was Willy Hollister, the main gig, the one the paying customers had come to hear. The place got quiet, and he began to play.

The song was a variation of *Good Woman Gone Bad*, an old number originally written for tenor sax. Hollister played it his way, and two bars into it Nudger knew he was better than good and nothing but bad luck could keep him from being great. He was backed by brass and a snare drum, but he didn't need it; he didn't need a thing in this world but that piano and you could tell it just by looking at the rapt expression on his aristocratic face.

"Didn't I tell you it was all there?" Fat Jack said softly beside Nudger. "Whatever else there is about him, the man can play piano."

Nudger nodded silently. Jazz basically is black music, but the fair, blond Hollister played it with all the soul and pain of its genesis. He finished up the number to riotous applause that quieted only when he swung into another, a blues piece. He sang that one while his hands worked the piano. His voice was as black as his music; in his tone, his inflection, there seemed to dwell centuries of suffering.

"I'm impressed," Nudger said, when the applause for the blues number had died down.

"You and everyone else." Fat Jack was sipping absinthe from a gold-rimmed glass. "Hollister won't be playing here much longer before moving up the show business ladder—not for what I'm paying him, and I'm paying him plenty."

"How did you happen to hire him?"

"He came recommended by a club owner in Chicago. Seems he started out in Cleveland playing small rooms, then moved up to better things in Kansas City, then Rush Street in Chicago. All I had to do was hear him play for five minutes to know I wanted to hire him. It's like catching a Ray Charles or a Garner on the way up."

"So what specifically is there about Hollister that bothers you?" Nudger asked. "Why shouldn't he be seeing Ineida Collins?"

Fat Jack scrunched up his padded features, seeking the word that might convey the thought. "His music is . . . uneven."

"That's hardly a crime," Nudger said, "especially if he can play so well when he's right."

"He ain't as right as I've heard him," Fat Jack said. "Believe me, Hollister can be even better than he was tonight. But it's not really his music that concerns me. Hollister acts strange at times, secretive. Sam

Judman, the drummer, went by his apartment last week, found the door unlocked, and let himself in to wait for Hollister to get home. When Hollister discovered him there, he beat him up—with his fists. Can you imagine a piano player like Hollister using his hands for *that*?" Fat Jack looked as if he'd discovered a hair in his drink.

"So he's obsessively secretive. What else?" What am I doing, Nudger asked himself, trying to talk myself out of a job?

But Fat Jack went on. "Hollister has seemed troubled, jumpy and unpredictable, for the last month. He's got problems, and like I told you, if he's seeing Ineida Collins, I got problems. I figure it'd be wise to learn some more about Mr. Hollister."

"The better to know his intentions, as they used to say."

"And in some quarters still say."

The lights did their dimming routine again, the crowd quieted, and Willy Hollister was back at the piano. But this time the center of attention was the tall, dark-haired girl leaning with one hand on the piano, her other hand delicately holding a microphone. Inside her plain navy blue dress was a trim figure. She had nice ankles, a nice smile. Nice was a word that might have been coined for her.

A stage name like Ineida Mann didn't fit her at all. She was prom queen and Girl Scouts and PTA and looked as if she'd blush at an off-color joke. But it crossed Nudger's mind that maybe it was simply a role; maybe she was playing for contrast.

Fat Jack knew what Nudger was thinking. "She's as straight and naive as she looks," he said. "But she'd like to be something else, to learn all about life and love in a few easy lessons."

Someone in the backup band had announced Ineida Mann, and she began to sing, the plaintive lyrics of an old blues standard. She had control but no range. Nudger found himself listening to the backup music, which included a smooth clarinet solo. The band liked Ineida and went all out to envelop her in good sound, but the audience at Fat Jack's was too smart for that. Ineida finished to light applause, bowed prettily, and made her exit. Competent but nothing special, and looking as if she'd just wandered in from suburbia. But this was what she wanted and her rich father was getting it for her. Parental love could be as blind as the other kind.

"So how are you going to get started on this thing?" Fat Jack asked. "You want me to introduce you to Hollister and Ineida?"

"Usually I begin a case by discussing my fee and signing a contract," Nudger said.

Fat Jack waved an immaculately manicured, ring-adorned hand. "Don't worry about the fee," he said. "Hey, let's make it whatever you usually charge plus twenty percent plus expenses. Trust me on that."

That sounded fine to Nudger, all except the trusting part. He reached into his inside coat pocket, withdrew his roll of antacid tablets, thumbed back the aluminum foil, and popped one of the white disks into his mouth, all in one practiced, smooth motion.

"What's that stuff for?" Fat Jack asked.

"Nervous stomach," Nudger explained.

"You oughta try this," Fat Jack said, nodding toward his absinthe. "Eventually it eliminates the stomach altogether."

Nudger winced. "I want to talk with Ineida," he said, "but it would be best if we had our conversation away from the club."

Fat Jack pursed his lips and nodded. "I can give you her address. She doesn't live at home with her father; she's in a little apartment over on Beulah Street. It's all part of the making-it-on-her-own illusion. Anything else?"

"Maybe. Do you still play the clarinet?"

Fat Jack cocked his head and looked curiously at Nudger, one tiny eye squinting through the tobacco smoke that hazed the air around the bar. "Now and again, but only on special occasions."

"Why don't we make the price of this job my usual fee plus only ten percent plus you do a set with the clarinet this Saturday night?"

Fat Jack beamed, then threw back his head and let out a roaring laugh that turned heads and seemed to shake the bottles on the back bar. "Agreed! You're a find, Nudger! First you trust me to pay you without a contract, then you lower your fee and ask for a clarinet solo instead of money. There's no place you can spend a clarinet solo! Hey, I like you, but you're not much of a businessman."

Nudger smiled and sipped his beer. Fat Jack hadn't bothered to find out the amount of Nudger's usual fee, so all this talk about percentages meant nothing. If detectives weren't good businessmen, neither were jazz musicians. He handed Fat Jack a pen and a club matchbook. "How about that address?"

**B**eulah Street was narrow and crooked, lined with low houses of French-Spanish architecture, an array of arches, pas-

tel stucco, and ornamental wrought iron. The houses had long ago been divided into apartments, each with a separate entrance. Behind each apartment was a small courtyard.

Nudger found Ineida Collins' address. It belonged to a pale yellow structure with a weathered tile roof and a riot of multicolored bougainvillea blooming wild halfway up one cracked and often-patched stucco wall.

He glanced at his wristwatch. Ten o'clock. If Ineida wasn't awake by now, he decided, she should be. He stepped up onto the small red brick front porch and worked the lion's head knocker on a plank door supported by huge black iron hinges.

Ineida came to the door without delay. She didn't appear at all sleepy after her late-night stint at Fat Jack's. Her dark hair was tied back in a French braid. She was wearing slacks and a peach-colored silky blouse. Even the harsh sunlight was kind to her; she looked young, as inexperienced and naive as Fat Jack said she was.

Nudger told her he was a writer doing a piece on Fat Jack's club. "I heard you sing last night," he said. "It really was something to see. I thought it might be a good idea if we talked."

It was impossible for her to turn down what in her mind was a celebrity interview. She lit up bright enough to pale the sunlight and invited Nudger inside.

Her apartment was tastefully but inexpensively furnished. There was an imitation Oriental rug on the hardwood floor, lots of rattan furniture, a Casablanca overhead fan rotating its wide flat blades slowly and casting soothing, flickering shadows. Through sheer beige curtains the apartment's courtyard was visible, well tended and colorful.

"Can I get you a cup of coffee, Mr. Nudger?" Ineida asked.

Nudger told her thanks, watched the switch of her trim hips as she walked into the small kitchen. From where he sat he could see a Mr. Coffee brewer on the sink, its glass pot half full. Ineida poured, returned with two mugs of coffee.

"How old are you, Ineida?" he asked.

"Twenty-three."

"Then you haven't been singing for all that many years."

She sat down, placed her steaming coffee mug on a coaster. "About five, actually. I sang in school productions, then studied for a while in New York. I've been singing at Fat Jack's for about two months. I love it."

"The crowd there seems to

like you," Nudger lied. He watched her smile and figured the lie was a worthy one. He pretended to take notes while he asked her a string of writer-like questions, pumping up her ego. It was an ego that would inflate only so far. Nudger decided that he liked Ineida Collins and hoped she would hurry up and realize she wasn't Ineida Mann.

"I'm told that you and Will Hollister are pretty good friends."

Her mood changed abruptly. Suspicion shone in her dark eyes, and the youthful smiling mouth became taut and suddenly ten years older.

"You're not a magazine writer," she said, in a betrayed voice.

Nudger's stomach gave a mule-like kick. "No, I'm not," he admitted.

"Then who are you?"

"Someone concerned about your wellbeing." Antacid time. He popped one of the white tablets into his mouth and chewed.

"Father sent you."

"No," Nudger said.

"Liar," she told him. "Get out."

"I'd like to talk with you about Willy Hollister," Nudger persisted. In his business persistence paid, one way or the other. He could only hope it wouldn't be the other.

"Get out," Ineida repeated.

"Or I'll call the police."

Within half a minute Nudger was outside again on Beulah Street, looking at the uncom-promising barrier of Ineida's closed door. Apparently she was touchy on the subject of Willy Hollister. Nudger slipped another antacid between his lips, turned his back to the warming sun, and began walking.

He'd gone half a block when he realized that he was casting three shadows. He stopped. The middle shadow stopped also, but the larger shadows on either side kept advancing. The large bodies that cast those shadows were suddenly standing in front of Nudger, and two very big men were staring down at him. One was smiling, one wasn't. Considering the kind of smile it was, that didn't make much difference.

"We noticed you talking to Miss Mann," the one on the left said. He had wide cheekbones, dark, pockmarked skin, and gray eyes that gave no quarter. "Whatever you said seemed to upset her." His accent was a cross between a southern drawl and clipped French. Nudger recognized it as Cajun. The Cajuns were a tough, predominantly French people who had settled southern Louisiana but never themselves.

Nudger let himself hope and started to walk on. The second man, who was shorter but had

a massive neck and shoulders, shuffled forward like a heavy-weight boxer, to block his way. Nudger swallowed his antacid tablet.

"You nervous, friend?" the boxer asked in the same rich Cajun accent.

"Habitually."

Pockmarked said, "We have an interest in Miss Mann's welfare. What were you talking to her about?"

"The conversation was private. Do you two fellows mind introducing yourselves?"

"We mind," the boxer said. He was smiling again, nastily. Nudger noticed that the tip of his right eyebrow had turned white where it was crossed by a thin scar.

"Then I'm sorry, but we have nothing to talk about."

Pockmarked shook his head patiently in disagreement. "We have this to talk about, my friend. There are parts of this great state of Looziahna that are vast swampland. Not far from where we stand, the bayou is wild. It's the home of a surprising number of alligators. People go into the bayou, and some of them never come out. Who knows about them? After a while, who cares?" The cold gray eyes had diamond chips in them. "You understand my meaning?"

Nudger nodded. He understood. His stomach understood.



"I think we've made ourselves clear," the boxer said. "We aren't nice men, sir. It's our business not to be nice, and it's our pleasure. So a man like yourself, sir, a reasonable man in good health, should listen to us and stay away from Miss Mann."

"You mean Miss Collins."

"I mean Miss Ineida Mann." He said it with the straight face of a true professional.

"Why don't you tell Willy Hollister to stay away from her?" Nudger asked.

"Mr. Hollister is a nice young man of Miss Mann's own choosing," Pockmarked said with an odd courtliness. "You she obviously doesn't like. You upset her. That upsets us."

"And me and Frick don't like to be upset," the boxer said. He closed a powerful hand on the lapel of Nudger's sport jacket, not pushing or pulling in the slightest, merely squeezing the material. Nudger could feel the vibrant force of the man's strength as if it were electrical current. "Behave yourself," the boxer hissed through his fixed smile.

He abruptly released his grip, and both men turned and walked away.

Nudger looked down at his abused lapel. It was as crimped as if it had been wrinkled in a vise for days. He wondered if the dry cleaners could do any-

thing about it when they pressed the coat.

Then he realized he was shaking. He loathed danger and had no taste for violence. He needed another antacid tablet and then, even though it was early, a drink.

New Orleans was turning out to be an exciting city, but not in the way the travel agencies and the chamber of commerce advertised.

**"Y**ou're no jazz writer," Willy Hollister said to Nudger, in a small back room of Fat Jack's club. It wasn't exactly a dressing room, though at times it served as such. It was a sort of all-purpose place where quick costume changes were made and breaks were taken between sets. The room's pale green paint was faded and peeling, and a steam pipe jutted from floor to ceiling against one wall. Yellowed show posters featuring jazz greats were taped here and there behind the odd assortment of worn furniture. There were mingled scents of stale booze and tobacco smoke.

"But I *am* a jazz fan," Nudger said. "Enough of one to know how good you are, and that you play piano in a way that wasn't self-taught." He smiled. "I'll bet you even read music."

"You have to read music."

Hollister said rather haughtily, "to graduate from Juilliard."

Even Nudger knew that Juilliard graduates weren't slouches. "So you have a classical background," he said.

"That's nothing rare; lots of jazz musicians have classical roots."

Nudger studied Hollister as the pianist spoke. Offstage, Hollister appeared older. His blond hair was thinning on top and his features were losing their boyishness, becoming craggy. His complexion was an unhealthy yellowish hue. He was a hunter, was this boy. Life's sad wisdom was in his eyes, resting on its haunches and ready to spring.

"How well do you know Ineida Mann?" Nudger asked.

"Well enough to know you've been bothering her," Hollister replied, with a bored yet wary expression. "We don't know what your angle is, but I suggest you stop. Don't bother trying to get any information out of me, either."

"I'm interested in jazz," Nudger said.

"Among other things."

"Like most people, I have more than one interest."

"Not like me, though," Hollister said. "My only interest is my music."

"What about Miss Mann?"

"That's none of your business." Hollister stood up, neatly

but ineffectively snubbed out the cigarette he'd been smoking, and seemed to relish leaving it to smolder to death in the ashtray. "I've got a number coming up in a few minutes." He tucked in his Fat Jack's T-shirt and looked severe. "I don't particularly want to see you any more, Nudger. Whoever, whatever you are, it doesn't mean burned grits to me as long as you leave Ineida alone."

"Before you leave," Nudger said, "can I have your autograph?"

Incredibly, far from being insulted by this sarcasm, Hollister scrawled his signature on a nearby folded newspaper and tossed it to him. Nudger took that as a measure of the man's artistic ego, and despite himself he was impressed. All the ingredients of greatness resided in Willy Hollister, along with something else.

Nudger went back out into the club proper. He peered through the throng of jazz lovers and saw Fat Jack leaning against the bar. As Nudger was making his way across the dim room toward him, he spotted Ineida at one of the tables. She was wearing a green sequined blouse that set off her dark hair and eyes, and Nudger regretted that she couldn't sing as well as she looked. She glanced at him, recognized him, and quickly turned away to listen to a gray-

ing, bearded man who was one of her party.

"Hey, Nudger," Fat Jack said, when Nudger had reached the bar, "you sure you know what you're doing, old sleuth? You ain't exactly pussy-footing. Ineida asked me about you, said you'd bothered her at home. Hollister asked me who you were. The precinct captain asked me the same question."

Nudger's stomach tightened. "A New Orleans police captain?"

Fat Jack nodded. "Captain Marrivale." He smiled broad and bold, took a sip of absinthe. "You make ripples big enough to swamp boats."

"What I'd like to do now," Nudger said, "is take a short trip."

"Lots of folks would like for you to do that."

"I need to go to Cleveland, Kansas City, and Chicago," Nudger said. "A couple of days in each city. I've got to find out more about Willy Hollister. Are you willing to pick up the tab?"

"I don't suppose you could get this information with long-distance phone calls?"

"Not and get it right."

"When do you plan on leaving?"

"As soon as I can. Tonight."

Fat Jack nodded. He produced an alligator-covered checkbook, scribbled in it, tore out a check, and handed it to

Nudger. Nudger couldn't make out the amount in the faint light. "If you need more, let me know," Fat Jack said. His smile was luminous in the dimness. "Hey, make it a fast trip, Nudger."

A week later Nudger was back in New Orleans, sitting across from Fat Jack McGee in the club owner's second floor office. "There's a pattern," he said, "sometimes subtle, sometimes strong, but always there, like in a forties Ellington piece."

"So tell me about it," Fat Jack said. "I'm an Ellington fan."

"I did some research," Nudger said, "read some old reviews, went to clubs and musicians' union halls and talked to people in the jazz communities where Willy Hollister played. He always started strong, but his musical career was checkered with flat spots, lapses. During those times, Hollister was just an ordinary performer."

Fat Jack appeared concerned, tucked his chin back into folds of flesh, and said, "That explains why he's falling off here."

"But the man is still making great music," Nudger said.

"Slipping from great to good," Fat Jack said. "Good jazz artists in New Orleans I can hire by the barrelful."

"There's something else about Willy Hollister," Nudger said. "Something that nobody picked up on because it spanned several years and three cities."

Fat Jack looked interested. If his ears hadn't been almost enveloped by overblown flesh, they would have perked up.

"Hollister had a steady girlfriend in each of these cities. All three women disappeared. Two were rumored to have left town on their own, but nobody knows where they went. The girlfriend in Cleveland, the first one, simply disappeared. She's still on the missing persons list."

"Whoo boy!" Fat Jack said. He began to sweat. He pulled a white handkerchief the size of a flag from the pocket of his sport jacket and mopped his brow, just like Satchmo but without the grin and trumpet.

"Sorry," Nudger said. "I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable."

"You're doing your job, is all," Fat Jack assured him. "But that's bad information to lay on me. You think Hollister had anything to do with the disappearances?"

Nudger shrugged. "Maybe the women themselves, and not Hollister, had to do with it. They were all the sort that traveled light and often. Maybe they left town of their own accord. Maybe for some reason

they felt they had to get away from Hollister."

"I wish Ineida would want to get away from him," Fat Jack muttered. "But Jeez, not like that. Her old man'd boil me down for axle grease. But then she's not cut from the same mold as those other girls; she's not what she's trying to be and she's strictly local."

"The only thing she and those other women have in common is Willy Hollister."

Fat Jack leaned back, and the desk chair creaked in protest. Nudger, who had been hired to solve a problem, had so far only brought to light the seriousness of that problem. The big man didn't have to ask "What now?" It was written in capital letters on his face.

"You could fire Willy Hollister," Nudger said.

Fat Jack shook his head. "Ineida would follow him, maybe get mad at me and sic her dad on the club."

"And Hollister is still packing customers into the club every night."

"That, too," Fat Jack admitted. Even the loosest businessman could see the profit in Willy Hollister's genius. "For now," he said, "we'll let things slide while you continue to watch." He dabbed at his forehead again with the wadded handkerchief.

"Hollister doesn't know who

I am," Nudger said, "but he knows who I'm not and he's worried. My presence might keep him aboveboard for a while."

"Fine, as long as a change of scenery isn't involved. I can't afford to have her wind up like those other women, Nudger."

"Speaking of winding up," Nudger said, "do you know anything about a couple of muscular robots? One has a scar across his right eyebrow and a face like an ex-pug's. His partner has a dark mustache, sniper's eyes, and is named Frick. Possibly the other is Frack. They both talk with thick Cajun accents."

Fat Jack raised his eyebrows. "Rocko Boudreau and Dwayne Frick," he said, with soft, terror-inspired awe. "They work for David Collins."

"I figured they did. They warned me to stay away from Ineida." Nudger felt his intestines twist into advanced Boy Scout knots. He got out his antacid tablets. "They suggested I might take up postmortem residence in the swamp." As he recalled his conversation with Frick and Frack, Nudger again felt a dark near-panic well up in him. Maybe it was because he was here in this small office with the huge and terrified Fat Jack McGee; maybe fear actually was contagious. He offered Fat Jack an antacid tablet.

Fat Jack accepted.

"I'm sure their job is to look after Ineida without her knowing it," Nudger said. "Incidentally, they seem to approve of her seeing Willy Hollister."

"That won't help me if anything happens to Ineida that's in any way connected to the club," Fat Jack said.

Nudger stood up. He was tired. His back still ached from sitting in an airline seat that wouldn't recline, and his stomach was still busy trying to digest itself. "I'll phone you if I hear any more good news."

Fat Jack mumbled something unintelligible and nodded, lost in his own dark apprehensions, a ponderous man grappling with ponderous problems. One of his inflated hands floated up in a parting gesture as Nudger left the stifling office. What he hadn't told Fat Jack was that immediately after each woman had disappeared, Hollister had regained his tragic, soulful touch on the piano.

When Nudger got back to his hotel, he was surprised to open the door to his room and see a man sitting in a chair by the window. It was the big blue armchair that belonged near the door.

When Nudger entered, the man turned as if resenting the

interruption, as if it were his room and Nudger the interloper. He stood up and smoothed his light tan suit coat. He was a smallish man with a triangular face and very springy red hair that grew in a sharp widow's peak. His eyes were dark and intense. He resembled a fox. With a quick and graceful motion he put a paw into a pocket for a wallet-sized leather folder, flipped it open to reveal a badge.

"Police Captain Marrivale, I presume," Nudger said. He shut the door.

The redheaded man nodded and replaced his badge in his pocket. "I'm Fred Marrivale," he confirmed. "I heard you were back in town. I think we should talk." He shoved the armchair around to face the room instead of the window and sat back down, as familiar as old shoes.

Nudger pulled out the small wooden desk chair and also sat, facing Marrivale. "Are you here on official business, Captain Marrivale?"

Marrivale smiled. He had tiny sharp teeth behind thin lips. "You know how it is, Nudger, a cop is always a cop."

"Sure. And that's the way it is when we go private," Nudger told him. "A confidential investigator is always that, no matter where he is or whom he's talking to."

"Which is kinda why I'm

here," Marrivale said. "It might be better if you were someplace else."

Nudger was incredulous. His nervous stomach believed what he'd just heard, but he didn't. "You're actually telling me to get out of town?"

Marrivale gave a kind of laugh, but there was no glint of amusement in his sharp eyes. "I'm not authorized to *tell* anyone to get out of town, Nudger. I'm not the sheriff and this isn't Dodge City."

"I'm glad you realize that," Nudger told him, "because I can't leave yet. I've got business here."

"I know about your business."

"Did David Collins send you to talk to me?"

Marrivale had a good face for policework; there was only the slightest change of expression. "We can let that question go by," he said, "and I'll ask you one. Why did Fat Jack McGee hire you?"

"Have you asked him?"

"No."

"He'd rather I kept his reasons confidential," Nudger said.

"You don't have a Louisiana P.I. license," Marrivale pointed out.

Nudger smiled. "I know. Nothing to be revoked."

"There are consequences a lot more serious than having your investigator's license pulled,

Nudger. Mr. Collins would prefer that you stay away from Ineida Mann."

"You mean Ineida Collins."

"I mean what I say."

"David Collins already had someone deliver that message to me."

"It's not a message from anyone but me," Marrivale said. "I'm telling you this because I'm concerned about your safety while you're within my jurisdiction. It's part of my job."

Nudger kept a straight face, got up and walked to the door, and opened it. He said, "I appreciate your concern, captain. Right now I've got things to do."

Marrivale smiled with his mean little mouth. He didn't seem rattled by Nudger's impolite invitation to leave; he'd said what needed saying. He got up out of the armchair and adjusted his suit. Nudger noticed that the suit hung on him just right and must have been tailored and expensive. No cop's salary, J. C. Penney wardrobe for Marrivale.

As he walked past Nudger, Marrivale paused and said, "It'd behoove you to learn to discern friend from enemy, Nudger." He went out and trod lightly down the hall toward the elevators, not looking back.

Nudger shut and locked the door. Then he went over to the bed, removed his shoes, and stretched out on his back on the

mattress, his fingers laced behind his head. He studied the faint water stains on the ceiling in the corner above him. They were covered by a thin film of mold. That reminded Nudger of the bayou.

He had to admit that Marrivale had left him with solid parting advice.

**T**hough plenty of interested parties had warned Nudger to stay away from Ineida Collins, everyone seemed to have neglected to tell him to give a wide berth to Willy Hollister. And after breakfast, it was Hollister who claimed Nudger's interest.

Hollister lived on St. Francois, within a few blocks of Ineida Collins's apartment. Their apartments were similar. Hollister's was the end unit of a low tan stucco building that sat almost flush with the sidewalk. What yard there was had to be in the rear. Through the low branches of a huge magnolia tree, Nudger saw some of the raw cedar fencing that sectioned the back premises into private courtyards.

Hollister might be home, sleeping after his late-night gig at Fat Jack's. But whether he was home or not, Nudger decided that his next move would be to knock on Hollister's door.

He rapped on the wooden door three times, casually leaned



toward it and listened. He heard no sound from inside. No one in the street seemed to be paying much attention to him, so after a few minutes Nudger idly gave the doorknob a twist.

It rotated all the way, clicked. The door opened about six inches. Nudger pushed the door open farther and stepped quietly inside.

The apartment no doubt came furnished. The furniture was old but not too worn; some of it probably had antique value. The floor was dull hardwood where it showed around the borders of a faded blue carpet. From where he stood, Nudger could see into the bedroom. The bed was unmade but empty.

The living room was dim. The wooden shutters on its windows were closed, allowing slanted light to come in through narrow slits. Most of the illumination in the room came from the bedroom and a short hall that led to a bathroom, then to a small kitchen and sliding glass doors that opened to the courtyard.

To make sure he was alone, Nudger called, "Mr. Hollister? Avon lady!"

No answer. Fine.

Nudger looked around the living room for a few minutes, examining the contents of drawers, picking up some sealed mail that turned out to be an insurance pitch and a utility bill.

He had just entered the bedroom when he heard a sound from outside the curtained window, open about six inches. It was a dull thunking sound that Nudger thought he recognized. He went to the window, parted the breeze-swayed gauzy white curtains, and bent low to peer outside.

The window looked out on the courtyard. What Nudger saw confirmed his guess about the sound. A shovel knifing into soft earth. Willy Hollister was in the courtyard garden, digging. Nudger crouched down so he could see better.

Hollister was planting rosebushes. They were young plants, but they already had red and white roses on them. Hollister had started on the left with the red roses and was alternating colors. He was planting half a dozen bushes and was working on the fifth plant, which lay with its roots wrapped in burlap beside the waiting, freshly dug hole.

Hollister was on both knees on the ground, using his hands to scoop some dirt back into the hole. He was forming a small dome over which to spread the rosebush's soon-to-be-exposed roots. He knew how to plant rosebushes, all right, and he was trying to ensure that these would live.

Nudger's stomach went into a series of spasms as Hollister

stood and glanced at the apartment as if he had sensed someone's presence. He drew one of the rolled-up sleeves of his white dress shirt across his perspiring forehead. For a few seconds he seemed to debate about whether to return to the apartment. Then he turned, picked up the shovel, and began digging the sixth and final hole.

Letting out a long breath, Nudger drew back from the open window and stood up straight. He'd go out by the front door and then walk around to the courtyard and call Hollister's name, as if he'd just arrived. He wanted to get Hollister's own version of his past.

As Nudger was leaving the bedroom, he noticed a stack of pale blue envelopes on the dresser, beside a comb and brush set monogrammed with Hollister's initials. The envelopes were held together by a fat rubber band. Nudger saw Hollister's address, saw the Beulah Street return address penned neatly in black ink in a corner of the top envelope. He paused for just a few seconds, picked up the envelopes, and slipped them into his pocket. Then he left Hollister's apartment the same way he'd entered.

There was no point in talking to Hollister now. It would be foolish to place himself in the apartment at the approximate

time of the disappearance of the stack of letters written by Ineida Collins.

Nudger walked up St. Francois for several blocks, then took a cab to his hotel. Though the morning hadn't yet heated up, the cab's air conditioner was on high and the interior was near freezing. The letters seemed to grow heavier and heavier in Nudger's jacket pocket, and to glow with a kind of warmth that gave no comfort.

Nudger had room service bring up a plain omelet and a glass of milk. He sat with his early lunch, his customary meal (it had a soothing effect on a nervous stomach), at the desk in his hotel room and ate slowly as he read Ineida Collins's letters to Hollister. He understood now why they had felt warm in his pocket. The love affair was, from Ineida's point of view at least, as soaring and serious as such an affair can get. Nudger felt cheapened by his crass invasion of Ineida's privacy. These were thoughts meant to be shared by no one but the two of them, thoughts not meant to be tramped through by a middle-aged detective not under the spell of love.

On the other hand, Nudger told himself, there was no way for him to know what the let-

ters contained *until* he read them and determined that he shouldn't have. This was the sort of professional quandary he got himself into frequently but never got used to.

The last letter, the one with the latest postmark, was the most revealing and made the tacky side of Nudger's profession seem worthwhile. Ineida Collins was planning to run away with Willy Hollister; he had told her he loved her and that they would be married. Then, after the fact, they would return to New Orleans and inform friends and relatives of the blessed union. It all seemed quaint, Nudger thought, and not very believable unless you happened to be twenty-three and love-struck and had lived Ineida Collins's sheltered existence.

Ineida also referred in the last letter to something important she had to tell Hollister. Nudger could guess what that important bit of information was. That she was Ineida Collins and she was David Collins's daughter and she was rich, and that she was oh so glad that Hollister hadn't known about her until that moment. Because that meant he wanted her for her own true self alone. Ah, love! It made Nudger's business go round.

Nudger refolded the letter, replaced it in its envelope, and

dropped it onto the desk. He tried to finish his omelet but couldn't. He wasn't really hungry, and his stomach had reached a tolerable level of comfort. He knew it was time to report to Fat Jack. After all, the man had hired him to uncover information, but not so Nudger would keep it to himself.

Nudger slid the rubber band back around the stack of letters, snapped it, and stood up. He considered having the letters placed in the hotel safe, but the security of any hotel safe was questionable. A paper napkin bearing the hotel logo lay next to his half-eaten omelet. He wrapped the envelopes in the napkin and dropped the bundle in the wastebasket by the desk. The maid wasn't due back in the room until tomorrow morning, and it wasn't likely that anyone would think Nudger would throw away such important letters. And the sort of person who would bother to search a wastebasket would search everywhere else and find the letters anyway.

He placed the tray with his dishes on it in the hall outside his door, hung the "Do Not Disturb" sign on the knob, and left to see Fat Jack McGee.

They told Nudger at the club that Fat Jack was out. Nobody was sure when he'd be back; he might not return until this eve-

ning when business started picking up, or he might have just strolled over to the Magnolia Blossom for a croissant and coffee and would be back any minute.

Nudger sat at the end of the bar, nursing a beer he didn't really want, and waited.

After an hour, the bartender began blatantly staring at him from time to time. Mid-afternoon or not, Nudger was occupying a bar stool and had an obligation. And maybe the man was right. Nudger was about to give in to the weighty responsibility of earning his place at the bar by ordering another drink he didn't want when Fat Jack appeared through the dimness like a light-footed, obese spirit in a white vested suit.

He saw Nudger, smiled his fat man's beaming smile, and veered toward him, diamond rings and gold jewelry flashing fire beneath pale coat sleeves. There was even a large diamond stickpin in his bib-like tie. He was a vision of sartorial immensity.

"We need to talk," Nudger told him.

"That's easy enough," Fat Jack said. "My office, hey?" He led the way, making Nudger feel somewhat like a pilot fish trailing a whale.

When they were settled in Fat Jack's office, Nudger said,

"I came across some letters that Ineida wrote to Hollister. She and Hollister plan to run away together, get married."

Fat Jack raised his eyebrows so high Nudger was afraid they might become detached. "Hollister ain't the marrying kind, Nudger."

"What kind is he?"

"I don't want to answer that."

"Maybe Ineida and Hollister will elope and live happily—"

"Stop!" Fat Jack interrupted him. He leaned forward, wide forehead glistening. "When are they planning on leaving?"

"I don't know. The letter didn't say."

"You gotta find out, Nudger!"

"I could ask. But Captain Marrivale wouldn't approve."

"Marrivale has talked with you?"

"In my hotel room. He assured me he had my best interests at heart."

Fat Jack appeared thoughtful. He swiveled in his chair and switched on the auxiliary window air conditioner. Its breeze stirred the papers on the desk, ruffled Fat Jack's gray-ing, gingery hair.

The telephone rang. Fat Jack picked it up, identified himself. His face went as white as his suit. "Yes, sir," he said. His jowls began to quiver; loose flesh beneath his left eye started to dance. Nudger was getting nervous just looking at him.

"You can't mean it," Fat Jack said. "Hey, maybe it's a joke. Okay, it ain't a joke." He listened a while longer and then said, "Yes, sir," again and hung up. He didn't say anything else for a long time. Nudger didn't say anything either.

Fat Jack spoke first. "That was David Collins. Ineida's gone. Not home, bed hasn't been slept in."

"Then she and Hollister have left as they planned."

"You mean as Hollister planned. Collins got a note in the mail."

"Note?" Nudger asked. His stomach did a flip; it was way ahead of his brain, reacting to a suspicion not yet fully formed.

"A ransom note," Fat Jack confirmed. "Unsigned, in cut-out newspaper words. Collins said Marrivale is on his way over here now to talk to me about Hollister. Hollister's disappeared, too. And his clothes are missing from his closet." Fat Jack's little pink eyes were bulging in his blanched face. "I better not tell Marrivale about the letters."

"Not unless he asks," Nudger said. "And he won't." He stood up.

"Where are you going?"

"I'm leaving," Nudger said, "before Marrivale gets here. There's no sense in making this easy for him."

"Or difficult for you."

"It works out that way, for a change."

Fat Jack nodded, his eyes unfocused yet thoughtful, already rehearsing in his mind the lines he would use on Marrivale. He wasn't a man to bow easily or gracefully to trouble, and he had seen plenty of trouble in his life. He knew a multitude of moves and would use them all.

He didn't seem to notice when Nudger left.

Hollister's apartment was shuttered, and the day's mail delivery sprouted like a white bouquet from the mailbox next to his door. Nudger doubted that David Collins had officially notified the police; his first, his safest, step would be to seek the personal help of Captain Marrivale, who was probably on the Collins payroll already. So it was unlikely that Hollister's apartment was under surveillance, unless by Frick and Frack, who, like Marrivale, probably knew about Ineida's disappearance.

Nudger walked unhesitatingly up to the front door and tried the knob. The door was locked this time. He walked around the corner, toward the back of the building, and unhitched the loop of rope that held shut the high wooden gate to the courtyard.

In the privacy of the fenced

courtyard, Nudger quickly forced the sliding glass doors and entered Hollister's apartment.

The place seemed almost exactly as Nudger had left it earlier that day. The matched comb and brush set was still on the dresser, though in a different position. Nudger checked the dresser drawers. They held only a few pairs of undershorts, a wadded dirty shirt, and some socks with holes in the toes. He crossed the bedroom and opened the closet door. The closet's blank back wall stared out at him. Empty. The apartment's kitchen was only lightly stocked with food; the refrigerator held a stick of butter, half a gallon of milk, various half-used condiments, and three cans of beer. It was dirty and needed defrosting. Hollister had been a lousy housekeeper.

The rest of the apartment seemed oddly quiet and in vague disorder, as if getting used to its new state of vacancy. There was definitely a deserted air about the place that suggested its occupant had shunned it and left in a hurry.

Nudger decided that there was nothing to learn here. No matchbooks with messages written inside them, no hastily scrawled, forgotten addresses or revealing ticket stubs. He never got the help that fictional detectives got—well, almost

never—though it was always worth seeking.

As he was about to open the courtyard gate and step back into the street, Nudger paused. He stood still, feeling a cold stab of apprehension, of dread knowledge, in the pit of his stomach.

He was staring at the rosebushes that Hollister had planted that morning. At the end of the garden were two newly planted bushes bearing red rosebuds. Hollister hadn't planted them that way. He had alternated the bushes by color, one red one white. Their order now was white, red, white, white, red, red.

Which meant that the bushes had been dug up. Replanted.

Nudger walked to the row of rosebushes. The earth around them was loose, as it had been earlier, but now it seemed more sloppily spread about, and one of the bushes was leaning at an angle. Not the work of a methodical gardener; more the work of someone in a hurry.

As he backed away from the freshly turned soil, Nudger's legs came in contact with a small wrought iron bench. He sat down. He thought for a while, oblivious of the warm sunshine, the colorful geraniums and bougainvillea. He became aware of the frantic chirping of birds on their lifelong hunt for sustenance, of the

soft yet vibrant buzzing of insects. Sounds of life, sounds of death. He stood up and got out of there fast, his stomach churning.

When he returned to his hotel room, Nudger found on the floor by the desk the napkin that had been wadded in the bottom of the wastebasket. He checked the wastebasket, but it was only a gesture to confirm what he already knew. The letters that Ineida Collins had written to Willy Hollister were gone.

**F**at Jack was in his office. Marrivale had come and gone hours ago.

Nudger sat down across the desk from Fat Jack and looked appraisingly at the harried club owner. Fat Jack appeared wrung out by worry. The Marrivale visit had taken a lot out of him. Or maybe he'd had another conversation with David Collins. Whatever his problems, Nudger knew that, to paraphrase the great Al Jolson, Fat Jack hadn't seen nothin' yet.

"David Collins just phoned," Fat Jack said. He was visibly uncomfortable, a veritable Niagara of nervous perspiration. "He got a call from the kidnapers. They want half a million in cash by tomorrow night, or Ineida starts being delivered in the mail piece by piece."

Nudger wasn't surprised. He knew where the phone call had originated.

"When I was looking into Hollister's past," he said to Fat Jack, "I happened to discover something that seemed ordinary enough then, but now has gotten kind of interesting." He watched the perspiration flow down Fat Jack's wide forehead.

"So I'm interested," Fat Jack said irritably. He reached behind him and slapped at the air conditioner, as if to coax more cold air despite the frigid thermostat setting.

"There's something about being a fat man, a man as large as you. After a while he takes his size for granted, accepts it as a normal fact of his life. But other people don't. A really fat man is more memorable than he realizes, especially if he's called Fat Jack."

Fat Jack drew his head back into fleshy folds and shot a tortured, wary look at Nudger. "Hey, what are you talking toward, old sleuth?"

"You had a series of failed clubs in the cities where Willy Hollister played his music, and you were there at the times when Hollister's women disappeared."

"That ain't unusual, Nudger. Jazz is a tight little world."

"I said people remember you," Nudger told him. "And they remember you knowing Willy



Hollister. But you told me you saw him for the first time when he came here to play in your club. And when I went to see Ineida for the first time, she knew my name. She bought the idea that I was a magazine writer; it fell right into place and it took her a while to get uncooperative. Then she assumed I was working for her father—as you knew she would.”

Fat Jack stood halfway up, then decided he hadn’t the energy for the total effort and sat back down in his groaning chair. “You missed a beat, Nudger. Are you saying I’m in on this kidnapping with Hollister? If that’s true, why would I have hired you?”

“You needed someone like me to substantiate Hollister’s involvement with Ineida, to find out about Hollister’s missing women. It would help you to set him up. You knew him better than you pretended. You knew that he murdered those three women to add some insane, tragic dimension to his music—the sound that made him great. You knew what he had planned for Ineida.”

“He didn’t even know who she really was!” Fat Jack sputtered.

“But you knew from the time you hired her that she was David Collins’s daughter. You schemed from the beginning to use Hollister as the fall guy in

your kidnapping plan.”

“Hollister is a killer—you said so yourself. I wouldn’t want to get involved in any kind of scam with him.”

“He didn’t know you were involved,” Nudger explained. “When you’d used me to make it clear that Hollister was the natural suspect, you kidnapped Ineida and demanded the ransom, figuring Hollister’s past and his disappearance would divert the law’s attention away from you.”

Fat Jack’s wide face was a study in agitation, but it was relatively calm compared to what must have been going on inside his head. His body was squirming uncontrollably, and the pain in his eyes was difficult to look into. He didn’t want to ask the question, but he had to and he knew it. “If all this is true,” he moaned, “where is Hollister?”

“I did a little digging in his garden,” Nudger said. “He’s under his roses, where he thought Ineida was going to wind up, but where you had space for him reserved all along.”

Fat Jack’s head dropped. His suit suddenly seemed to get two sizes too large. As his body trembled, tears joined the perspiration on his quivering cheeks. “When did you know?” he asked.

“When I got back to my hotel and found the letters from Ineida

to Hollister missing. You were the only one other than myself who knew about them." Nudger leaned over the desk to look Fat Jack in the eye. "Where is Ineida?" he asked.

"She's still alive," was Fat Jack's only answer. Crushed as he was, he was still too wily to reveal his hole card. It was as if his fat were a kind of rubber, lending inexhaustible resilience to body and mind.

"It's negotiation time," Nudger told him, "and we don't have very long to reach an agreement. While we're sitting here talking, the police are digging in the dirt I replaced in Hollister's garden."

"You called them?"

"I did. But right now, they expect to find Ineida. When they find Hollister, they'll put all the pieces together the way I did and get the same puzzle-picture of you."

Fat Jack nodded sadly, seeing the truth in that prognosis. "So what's your proposition?"

"You release Ineida, and I keep quiet until tomorrow morning. That'll give you a reasonable head start on the law. The police don't know who phoned them about the body in Hollister's garden, so I can stall them for at least that long without arousing suspicion."

Fat Jack didn't deliberate for more than a few seconds. He nodded again, then stood up,

supporting his ponderous weight with both hands on the desk. "What about money?" he whined. "I can't run far without money."

"I've got nothing to lend you," Nudger said. "Not even the fee I'm not going to get from you."

"All right," Fat Jack sighed.

"I'm going to phone David Collins in one hour," Nudger told him. "If Ineida isn't there, I'll put down the receiver and dial the number of the New Orleans police department."

"She'll be there," Fat Jack said. He tucked in his sweat-plastered shirt beneath his huge stomach paunch, buttoned his suit coat, and without a backward glance at Nudger glided majestically from the room. He would have his old jaunty stride back in no time.

Nudger glanced at his watch. He sipped Fat Jack's best whisky from the club's private stock while he waited for an hour to pass. Then he phoned David Collins, and from the tone of Collins's voice he guessed the answer to his question even before he asked it.

Ineida was home.

When Nudger answered the knock on his hotel room door early the next morning, he wasn't really surprised to find Frick and Frack looming in the hall. They pushed into

the room without being invited. There was a sneer on Frick's pockmarked face. Frack gave his boxer's nifty little shuffle and stood between Nudger and the door, smiling politely.

"We brought you something from Mr. Collins," Frick said, reaching into an inside pocket of his pale green sport jacket. It just about matched Nudger's complexion.

All Frick brought out, though, was an envelope. Nudger was surprised to see that his hands were steady as he opened it.

The envelope contained an airline ticket for a noon flight to St. Louis.

"You did okay, my friend," Frick said. "You did what was right for Ineida. Mr. Collins appreciates that."

"What about Fat Jack?" Nudger asked. Frack's polite smile changed subtly. It became a dreamy, unpleasant sort of smile.

"Where Fat Jack is now," Frack said, "most of his friends are alligators."

"After Fat Jack talked to you," said Frick, "he went to Mr. Collins. He couldn't make himself walk out on all that possible money; some guys just

have to play all their cards. He told Mr. Collins that for a certain amount of cash he would reveal Ineida's whereabouts, but it all had to be done in a hurry." Now Frick also smiled. "He revealed her whereabouts in a hurry, all right, and for free. In fact, he kept talking till nobody was listening, till he couldn't talk any more."

Nudger swallowed dryly. He forgot about breakfast. Fat Jack had been a bad businessman to the end, dealing in desperation instead of distance. Maybe he'd had too much of the easy life; maybe he couldn't picture going on without it. That was no problem for him now.

When Nudger got home, he found a flat, padded package with a New Orleans postmark waiting for him. He placed it on his desk and cautiously opened it. The package contained two items: A check from David Collins made out to Nudger for more than twice the amount of Fat Jack's uncollectable fee. And an old jazz record in its original wrapper, a fifties rendition of *You Got the Reach but Not the Grasp*.

It featured Fat Jack McGee on clarinet.

# UNSOLVED

by  
**Roger Hufford**

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the June issue.

Five couples live in Confusion Condominium. Their lives are made difficult by the fact that one of the five men makes his living as a thief. The other four husbands are a rich man, a poor man, a beggar man, and a doctor. One member of each couple always tells the truth and the other always lies. In four of the five couples, it is the wife who tells the truth and the husband who lies. The only husband who tells the truth is the poor man, as you might suspect. A further complication is that all ten persons have names that can designate men or women. In all the statements made below by the ten persons, nobody mentions the name of his own spouse.

- |                |  |
|----------------|--|
| <i>Bobby</i>   | 1. Pat is married to Terry.  |
| <i>Ellie</i>   | 2. Kim is married to the rich man.   |
| <i>Freddie</i> | 3. Ellie is married to Ronnie.   |
| <i>Jerry</i>   | 4. Ellie is married to Willie.<br>5. Freddie is the beggar man.                        |
| <i>Kim</i>     | 6. Jerry is not married to Terry.  |
| <i>Lou</i>     | 7. Pat is not the poor man.<br>8. Bobby is married to Jerry.                           |
| <i>Pat</i>     | 9. Freddie is married to Ronnie.<br>10. Willie is not the doctor.                      |
| <i>Ronnie</i>  | 11. Jerry is either the rich man, or Jerry is a woman.<br>12. Bobby is married to Kim. |
| <i>Terry</i>   | 13. Freddie is married to Lou.<br>14. Ellie is a woman.                                |
| <i>Willie</i>  | 15. Kim is the thief.<br>16. Freddie tells the truth.                                  |
- Who is the thief?*

See page 154 for the solution to the April puzzle.



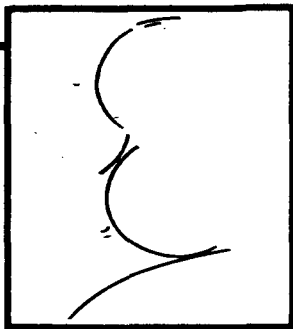
Jackie Gleason shows Karl Malden how it's done by dancing with fellow con artist, Teri Garr.

*Photograph by Stephen Vaughan*

© 1982 Universal City Studios, Inc.

# MURDER BY DIRECTION

by Peter Shaw



**T**he *Sting II* comes ten years after the highly successful original with Robert Redford and Paul Newman, and is just as entertaining. The characters are familiar but new—this time they are based on two real life confidence men. The audience knows in advance exactly what to expect: an elaborate confidence or “sting” operation by a team of experienced grifters, along with fast-paced plot reversals and an unravelling at the end, by which time it finally becomes clear who was fooling whom.

The British actor Oliver Reed plays Doyle Lonergan, a gangster out both to sting and to murder the confidence men who once took him for half a million dollars—a truly staggering fig-

ure inasmuch as the trickery took place sometime in the 1930's. (The action is set in 1940 in New York City.) Lonergan, a poetry quoting, well-dressed mastermind of revenge, is portrayed by Reed with brooding, heavy-lidded, Laurence Olivier-like menace. Lonergan's main target is the still better dressed Jackie Gleason. Fresh out of jail, Gleason is in the process of organizing a complicated sting operation. His delightful performance brings back memories of Reggie Van Gleason, his oily, super suave character from the early days of television. Gleason's main target is a grasping Brooklyn crime kingpin played with broad strokes of vulgarity by Karl Malden. When Gleason and

Malden confront one another at Malden's sleazy nightclub, the acting escalates into farce. Gleason absurdly pretends to be "Trevor Plantagenet," a worldly foreigner. (His "real" name in the screenplay is just as outlandish: "Fargo Gondorff.") Malden, forgetting he's supposed to be a dangerous character, fumes and sweats and splutters as Gleason outdoes him on the dance floor, at the pool table, and at three card monte. Their scenes together are truly like television comedy of the 1950's, and they demonstrate why its broad posturing went out of style. Still, it can be fun going back to belly laughs for a while—at least so long as one is guided by pros like these two.

The romantic interest is supplied by Teri Garr and Mac Davis. Davis is a successful lyricist and pop singer making his third movie; Garr appeared in *The Conversation*, the 1973 mystery thriller about electronic eavesdropping. They play

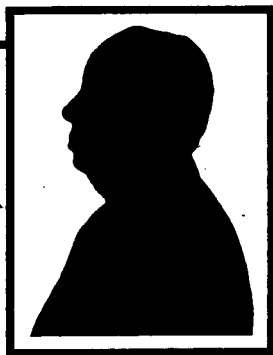
professional grifters who fall in love in the process of tricking, pickpocketing, and generally one-upping each other. The two young stars are filmed in a slight sepia tint against the background of New York of forty years ago. Never have the nightclubs, cabs, and limousines of that era seemed more fashionable, or the waterfront, the Coney Island Steeplechase, Chinatown, and the boxing gyms and arenas more attractively gritty.

The secret of *The Sting II*'s success is that unlike real life it contains no innocent victims of crime. Everyone who loses his money—or his life—not only is himself a crook, but is taken in the act of trying to trick someone else. The audience can just sit back, watching all the deception and robbery with perfect equanimity. At the same time the puzzle solvers among the spectators just may find it possible to work out which team of grifters has enough extra tricks up its sleeve to win.



# FRAMES OF REFERENCE

by Peter Christian



**I**n the recent police film *48 Hrs.*, we escort a tough cop and a convict paroled on a two-night pass as they pursue a killer through San Francisco's cowboy bars and seedier night haunts. In *Hammett*, a private investigator seeks a Chinese girl through that city's garish, red-tinted Oriental quarter and its hazy waterfront. **San Francisco**, the "city by the bay," has many charms to attract the mystery film, and it has been a backdrop for some of the great crime movies of past and present.

Foremost is *The Maltese Falcon*, the 1941 film version of the Dashiell Hammett classic discussed in last month's column. In it, the city is seen in its everyday garb; the settings include dusty offices and twisting back alleys. It is in just such an outdoor locale that the body of Sam Spade's murdered partner is found, and there Spade discovers the clue that will help pin down the killer. But San Francisco had been a background for crime dramas for decades before. In *Fog Over Frisco* (1934), for example, a young Bette Davis is a reckless thrill-seeker who becomes dangerously involved with the city's underworld. Far back into silent films, the sprawling Chinese sector had hinted of lurking peril; in *Chinatown Squad* (1935, originally called *Frisco Nights*), Lyle Talbot is a member of a police detail especially assigned to that district's crimes.

Many series-detective films have had Frisco settings. The climaxes of two early Charlie Chan adventures, *The Chinese Parrot*

(1927) and *Behind That Curtain* (1929), occur there, and the recent *Charlie Chan and the Curse of the Dragon Queen* (1980) highlights the city with spectacular photography, though the mystery is dismal. The second Nick Charles romp, *After the Thin Man* (1936), had him and Nora searching for a friend missing in Chinatown. Both the Falcon and the Saint accepted cases that took them to San Francisco, and Rock Hudson, the husband of the *McMillan and Wife* television series, played the city's commissioner of police.

San Francisco is a tangible presence in many films. In *Dark Passage* (1947), it is the city to which Humphrey Bogart goes after he escapes from San Quentin, falsely imprisoned for his wife's murder. Valentina Cortesa is a war's-end immigrant who assumes a dead person's identity in order to live in *The House on Telegraph Hill* (1951). Adolph Menjou is a police lieutenant who tracks down *The Sniper* (1952) terrorizing different sections of the city. In *The Line-up* (1958), a gritty crime movie drawn from an early television series, a team of cops must retrieve three packages of heroin unsuspectingly brought into San Francisco by travellers. And in *Sudden Fear* (1952), heiress Joan Crawford suspects her husband (Jack Palance) is trying to kill her; in the finale his car murderously pursues her down the city's steep streets.

Blake Edwards' suspense-filled *Experiment in Terror* (1962), in which a woman bank teller is the target of a maniac, was filmed at such real locations as the Oakland Bay Bridge and Candlestick Park. *Point Blank* (1967) is but one of the many crime dramas set in part at Alcatraz, the prison island in the bay. And *Bullitt* (1968), with Steve McQueen as a cop suspicious of a mobster's killing, careens down many a San Francisco street.

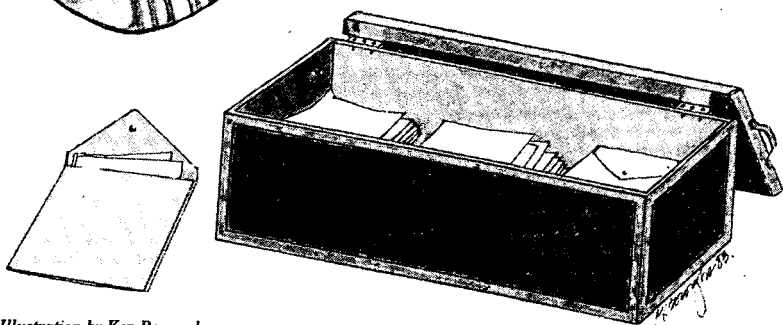
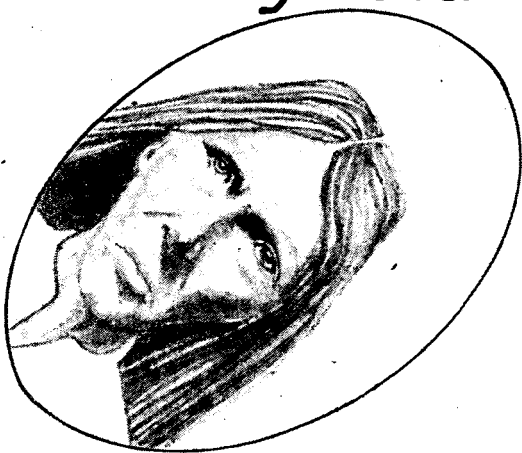
Sometimes Frisco mysteries may be lighthearted, as in *The Black Bird* (1975), in which George Segal plays Sam Spade's son, still after the same statue in the same city, or *Foul Play* (1978), in which Goldie Hawn, despite some clumsiness, prevents the assassination of a visiting pope.

But of all the mystery motion pictures with the city as a location, Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* makes by far the lushest use of it. From art galleries to mission churches to the town's very rooftops, San Francisco glows and preens in a tale of a police detective (James Stewart) who finds, loses, and finds once again a strange, wraith-like woman—a towering suspense classic (unseen for years, but soon to be released anew) made all the more perfect because of its enchanting setting.

FICTION

# Poison Clean

by Barbara Ninde Byfield



*Illustration by Ken Borroughs*

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“**P**oison clean! *I’ll* say.” Millie sagged down at the stainless steel kitchen table, apprehensive at finding it was only nine thirty in the morning. “Hope she doesn’t mind if I have a smoke.”

“No, she don’t. So long as it’s only here in the kitchen.” Big old Bea limped from the stove, her weight heavy on her cane, and set a cup of coffee in front of the maid who would replace her next week while she had a new plastic joint put in her hip. “You got about a quarter hour, once she’s in her bath like now. When you hear the plug pulled and her turning on the shower, she’ll be another good ten minutes finishing washing afore she comes back into the bedroom.

“You got her bed all made up fresh, clean curtains up, dresser scarves, all that?”

“Yep, like you told me. Soon as she finished her breakfast and went into the bathroom. But—*every* day? Everything?”

“Yes. Same for the bathroom. Once she’s finished dressing. Shower curtain, cap, curtains, bathmat, and wash everything down with Lysol before putting the clean things out. Towel rods especially, soap dish, everything.”

“Whew. I saw she had one of them purple sterilizing lights on her john, like down to the bus station.”

“Yes. And don’t let that roll of throwaway plastic gloves run low. Uses three, four pairs a day, depending.”

“She must be really nuts on germs. Hey, what’s that?” There was a banging and a heavy rap under the kitchen floor, and then a soft slithering sound in the wall behind Millie’s chair.

“That’ll be Ella, she has her own key to the cellar stairs outside, does all the laundry. That’s the upstairs washing coming down the chute on top of the library slipcovers and curtains. I took them off for you last night, so the wash’s backed up in the chute a little bit.” Bea limped over to a hatch in the wall and opened it, took out a breakfast tray that was squeezed into the dumb waiter. “Tray fits better if you put it in sideways, Millie; I swear when this house was built somebody got mixed up and what’s the laundry chute—it’s too big—was s’posed to be the dumb waiter, it’s too small. Well, everything else here’s too big or too small, what’s it matter.” Bea began to scrape the tray’s paper plate, cup, plastic cutlery and mat into the incinerator chute beside the dumb waiter. “The Madam’s not really nuts, just kind of spooky about germs. Seems a shame, though; she won’t even use her own nice china and silver these

past few years and the pantry's full of it, and lovely old tablelinen." There was a whirring and clanking of ropes, and Millie sputtered on her coffee. "Don't worry," Bea told her, "it's an old house, you'll get used to the noises. That's just Ella, putting a clean set of slipcovers and glass curtains for the library on the dumb waiter and sending them up for you. Best time to put them on is right after you've done the bathroom upstairs. Madam usually sits in her bedroom for an hour to read the newspaper afore she comes down."

"You mean, clean slipcovers and all, downstairs too, every day?"

"Just the library, all the other rooms got closed up over the years. Yes, white bird's-eye piqué, and organdy curtains. Sofa, footstool, three chairs, four windows. But it goes pretty quick once you get the hang of it. Just empty the dumb waiter here and upstairs from time to time as Ella sends things up, it's too small for all the wash at once. Ella usually finishes up about three. She brings her own lunch so you don't have to worry about her at all. Oh, and the Madam changes her clothes three times a day, too, but she puts those down the chute herself, mostly."

"Well, that's really something. She must have a time getting clothes at all, she's so tiny, not even five foot, more like a child. Not sickly, is she?" Millie was accustomed to work, and since Ella had the burden of the laundry, changing bed linen and curtains and things every day was still going to be easier than night work, than pushing a big industrial vacuum cleaner in offices in the city. But she didn't much like sick people.

"Not the Madam." Bea hooked her cane over the edge of the table and lowered herself carefully into a chair, wincing with pain. "Not sick at all, just has this thing about keeping clean since her father died. That was more'n twenty years ago. These days, last few years, she won't even go out much unless it snows, or something clean like that. Clarence—he lives over the garage, feeds himself—keeps her car all ready, washes off the garden every morning at eight, shrubs and all them white flowers, grass, but I can hardly recall the last time she went for a drive. Used to like sitting by the river in winter, the Madam did. Well, it's time for you to take over now, do her bathroom. Here, get the newspaper out of the oven and take it up with you. She likes it in the stove for fifteen minutes at two hundred degrees to disinfect it." Bea's sagging, pain-raddled face smiled wryly as at the antics of a favorite child as Millie, her starched white uniform crackling, left behind the familiar smell of hot newsprint.

**B**y the end of her trial week, Millie was thoroughly familiar with the big old house and even beginning to find her eccentric employment almost as routine as her former job.

It'll be almost too quiet, she thought, when Bea goes to the city hospital to have her hip fixed, but then if she didn't need the operation, I wouldn't have her job for two months, would I? And besides, she laughed to herself, I can always stand at the top of the cellar stairs and listen to the laundry being done. Good lord, this is the only place I've ever heard of that has a washing machine with a built in BOIL cycle! And, she might have added, a fifty gallon drum of Clorox, sanitized drying closets for hand wash, and a whole cellar full of air conditioners and the incinerator and furnace filters, vents, dials, dehumidifiers, all to make sure that the air pumped upstairs was warm, thoroughly clean, and stripped of possibly putrescent humidity.

As Bea had predicted, Ella bounced across the empty county road and up the gravel drive in a rusty Gremlin every morning, clattered down the cellar stairs, and slung her lunch bag and coat on a chair. Snapping on the lights, she first of all put a Walkman headset over her ears, punched on a cassette drawn from her voluminous bag, yanked the dangling rope that held the slatted wooden cage to the ceiling at the bottom of the laundry chute, and let the day's first offering of linens tumble down onto the big folding table beneath, her wiry body wiggling in the rhythm of a frug, boogie, cha cha, waltz. As the day progressed and more laundry slithered down onto the table, she maneuvered it rhythmically through soak tubs, machines, mangles, and irons, loading the dumb waiter with the finished work and sending it clanking up for Millie. Millie could tell Ella wasn't going to be any company; she tore through her work furiously and fastidiously but even ate her brown bag lunch to some unheard music from the cassettes and hustled off in mid-afternoon leaving the cellar quiet and spotless and the expensive machinery whirring away automatically.

Millie'd seen Bea's room in the attic, the one she'd be in herself for two months while Bea was in the city hospital and then learning how to walk again in the convalescent home. Boy, those narrow old back stairs, with no hand rail neither, must be awful for her with a bad hip that'd been let go too long. Bea'd told her the doctor finally made it clear that it was a new plastic joint or the rest of her life, pretty soon, in a wheelchair. "The Madam don't like it, I been the only one to look after things for so long, but she'll get

used to you right off once I've left, Millie. Just keep things real clean, and real quiet." Well, Millie thought, for what I'm getting paid I'd do ten times more'n that. But I'm glad it's not for too long. This place'd drag me down; Bea says she's only about fifty, but so am I and I don't look *that* dug up, all gnarled and worn out.

Bea'd taken some pills this noon at lunch, and another one a minute ago, and now as they sat at supper in the kitchen, the Madam having her first martini in the library before her dinner, Bea looked more comfortable than she had all week. "One thing I should tell you, Millie." Bea put down her glass of beer and crumpled her napkin nervously. "The Madam—well, it ain't personal, she's always done it, even before the Mister died. She gets funny about people slacking their work, sets little traps sometimes, like a Kleenex or a button in a bathrobe pocket, to see if Ella turns things out before she washes them. Or, she always puts her hair combings in a little plastic bag in the bathroom wastebasket, so if you see a hair or two someplace you'll know she's checking to be sure you really vacuum or dust, you know. Once she made a mark on the Lysol bottle, and checked it after I'd done the bathroom, I saw her. That sort of thing. But just you do good work and you'll be all right."

"If you say so. How long's she been like this, always?"

"No, not always. I came in to work after my folks died, just before her father, the Mister, took sick. Oh, he had all the money, he did, but she was real biddable anyway, shy little bit of thing. He wouldn't have none of doctors or nurses, not him, nor of hospitals. Lucky I was here, he had to be turned and lifted, bed changed all the time, you know the sort of thing, tubes and pans, packs on the ulcers, spitting up, hair falling out at the end. Well, it was her and me and what the doctor could tell us over the phone. It was hard, he went on almost eighteen months, the old Mister, afore he died."

"But then she married, after, huh?" Millie lit a cigarette.

"The Madam? No, she never married. Clarence and the Mister had just always called her Madam before I came, and I did, too. Hates men, she does, scared silly of them, after the way the Mister died. It didn't bother me none, I was just off the farm and used to things, but she was like a tiny little princess. I guess for her it was terrible. That's the library bell now, she'll want you to pour her second martini and pass the almond dish. Then you come back and I'll show you how to dish up her dinner tray one last time. She always takes a bottle of this white wine with dinner and you have



to open it in front of her; I'll put the screw on the tray. And now's the time to put the aquavit bottle in the freezer, it gets just the right cold for after dinner."

Bea lifted covers from pots, turned down the warming oven. As she carefully placed the food on the warmed paper plates and took the chilled plastic wine glass from the freezer, she wondered what it'd be like to have colored food in the hospital after so long a time of cooking and eating just white things. Rice, fish, chicken breasts, cauliflower, onions, potatoes, angel cake, blanc mange, all of them good and tasty, and there wasn't nothing wrong with uncolored margarine. But still, Bea remembered the thick gold of acorn squash, bright spinach, vibrant beets, mustard on bratwurst. Well, there were scallops tonight, with white pepper, pearl onions, rice timbales; and apple puree with whipped cream.

"You've done real good this week, Millie." They could hear, faintly, the television in the library. Madam had finished her dinner and Millie had taken in the crystal clear aquavit. "Now, Madam's been real kind and ordered a taxi all the way from the city for me tomorrow afternoon—there's no bus until six on Sunday and Clarence is off. I've got to check into the hospital before four, and it's an hour and a half ride. I'll leave a cold supper for Madam this once, and if you're here Monday morning at seven, that'll be fine. I'll put the key under the mat outside, we've only got one. And Millie, so long as you put a clean sheet over the chair in the library and don't smoke in there, after she's gone to bed the Madam don't mind you watching the television if you keep it turned way down. It helps some, at night."

**W**earily, Bea locked the kitchen door until morning, tumbled the last of the day's aprons and towels into the chute, and turned off the lights. Madam was up late in the library, there was that special on icebergs she wanted to see. Bea hauled herself up the back stairs, wanting to scream with the hurt in her hip; she'd have another pill after she'd turned down the Madam's big old bed and then gone up and gotten out the suitcase Madam'd said she could use. It was October now, it'd be cold by the time she'd be back and her woolies must smell something terrible of mothballs.

After the Mister had died, the whole house had been disinfected and fumigated, and all the things and furnishings of his life and rooms had been taken away. Then, gradually, the other rooms

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began to be closed, sealed, as the Madam stopped trusting them. But there was still a big corner closet in the attic that held old trunks, luggage, a heavy set of old golf clubs. Bea pulled on the overhead light and, panting, eased herself slowly onto the lid of a trunk, looking about. There it was, the nice big Pullman case, sticking out from its usual place. Millie'd run the Hoover up here yesterday and gotten in all the corners, good for her. Whether it was pain, or one pill too many, or fear of the surgery ahead, Bea found her throat thickening and hot, sad tears coming to her eyes.

She had had a suitcase once, brand new and cheap, but it had held all her hope and future and she'd showed it to Madam with pride and happiness. "He's going to send for me soon as he can, next month, Madam," she'd announced, giving notice as was only right, especially with the Mister so sick. It was the Monday morning after her weekend-in-the-month off. "We was married Saturday, he wouldn't take no, wouldn't wait no longer." The thin little gold band on her chapped hand glowed warm. One thing she'd say for the Madam, she stood there in the dark hall outside the sickroom, like a tiny little china doll or a little girl dressed up like a nurse, with the cloth mask the doctor'd told them both to wear dangling from her neck, and she'd tucked back into place under her cap a strand of jet black hair, managing a smile, a smile for Bea.

"Bea! What a surprise! I didn't know you had a—but even if it's so sudden, it's lovely, I'm sure." Then there had been a sound of something falling off a table, breaking, and Bea had quickly put her suitcase in the cleaning closet and, taking up a wrapper and mask, had gone into the Mister's room to help.

The cheap new suitcase must have been taken away with all the sickroom things. She hadn't seen it or thought of it for years. That awful month, that wonderful month of waiting, hoping, to hear from her Bert, nursing and washing and lifting, keeping the Madam from straining her tiny back, carrying heavy kettles, piles of sheets. Bea waited, hoped, and plunged her big, strong, farmgirl's body into helping in every way she could think of.

"I want to make this as easy as I can for you, Bea. Sit down, please." The Madam was in the library, it was one of the Mister's quieter mornings. "Your Bert, Bea, you haven't heard from him as he promised, have you?"

"Not yet, ma'am. But he—"

"Dear Bea." She raised her tiny white hand, her clear voice sounding like a sad flute. "I've been concerned for you, about this Bert Jenks of yours. It was very sudden, wasn't it? He worked on the crew fixing the dam in the village, that was a very short time for you to know him. We know nothing of him at all, do we, really? Bea, I asked the lawyers to look into him, just to reassure both of us that everything was all right. And—Bea, you won't be hearing from your Bert." The clear morning light fell on the leather top of the desk. There was a thick brown envelope, folded papers, expensive papers. Bea lifted a corner of her apron without knowing it and rubbed away a faint smudge from the mahogany edge.

"Bert Jenks has a wife already, Bea, and more than a few children. A string of debts as long as your arm, too. Oh, my dear, I hope you didn't give him any of your *savings*?" The little white hand laid in compassion on Bea's large red one was cool, soft.

"For getting us a place to live," Bea gulped.

"Poor Bea. And you'd only known him—a little more than a month? I'm afraid there's more—he has a record of this sort of thing, there was a breach of promise suit once, a court order for child support another time. You're very lucky to be out of it, you know. A bad egg, this Bert Jenks, a really rotten egg."

Long gunmetal gray weeks of shattered hope went by. She remembered spring when the river had flowed high and lilacs, then mock-orange, bloomed in the moonlight, and she should have said no but he had wanted her so and no one had before, and remembered laughing softly into his shoulder when he shyly stammered he was afraid she might not like living in Kentucky on the farm with his pa, and she had laughed because it sounded like heaven, it would have been heaven.

If it had been true.

Well. She shook herself and began looking at the suitcase again. Maybe better take that little grip, too, for boots and winter coat. But as she looked into the corner, she remembered that wasn't a grip after all, it was that old leather-covered file case that had stood on the low table in the library before the Madam had the television installed; for once Clarence had been let in the house to carry it up here, and Bea'd spent the whole day spraying and cleaning the library after the television men had gone.

Idly she rubbed her stiff hand over the box. She'd once seen the Mister closing it, putting the key into a sort of niche in the side.

Yes, there it was, if you pressed that particular knothole, a little drawer popped open. The key slipped into the lock smoothly, as if no time had passed at all.

It was empty, except for a brown envelope and expensive papers, expensive papers.

A lawyer's writing paper. "Dear Miss Safford: I enclose the report you requested about the past history and character of one Albert Jenks of Berea, Kentucky. Clinton Investigators have been found reliable in other inquiries from our office. I hope they provide you with the information you require and that the young man's death is not to your disadvantage. If we can be of further . . ."

Expensive paper, this one yellowed a bit. "Jenks, Albert. Only child of small farmer (mortgage on sixty-five acres), Berea, Kentucky. Severe stammer, harelip, graduated with honors county high school, completed two years night school studying engineering. Single, age 34, worked intermittently for construction firms to pay tax and mortgage on farm. Last employment: five weeks on Ashton River Dam, then transferred to work on shopping mall in Maple City. Killed day after arrival in fall from scaffold. His possessions (scanty) returned to his father, including unaddressed letter to a "Dear Bea" enclosing deposit receipt on rental of mobile home, and among other effects a snapshot of a rather plain woman."

A rather plain woman. Very plain, a big lunking thirty she'd been. Her mind awoke to the present, she had been sitting holding the papers dated twenty years ago for over two hours, by her wristwatch.

Her wristwatch. When she and the Madam had come back from the Mister's funeral, the black velvet box had been on the kitchen table. Madam had handed it to her. "It's waterproof, Bea, you can wear it in the laundry, dishpan, you never need to take it off. It will always tell you the time, Bea, the right time, and just remember the one thing it will never tell you?" Madam's little face peered up at her, with its black glittering eyes hot through the dark veil, Bea standing as she twisted her old knitted hat in her rough hands, looking at the watch.

"Never tell me when to leave, Madam. Because I promised I never would."

"So you did, dear. About your savings, dear Bea. I know you'd meant to help your cousin's boy through trade school; I'm seeing to that now, he'll be taken care of for the whole two years. That's my promise to you. Now, let us both lift our hearts from grief. All

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the bad things are over, Bea, all the bad things."

But the worst thing all the years since had been to remember her Bert as a liar, a cheat, laughing at her. Not as a shy, stammering man who had been abruptly killed. That would have been—not a good remembering, but real at least, and loving and honest. She would have been his widow, gone to stay with his pa in Kentucky, maybe.

Later, Bea heaved her stiff, cold body off the trunk and picked up the suitcase. She caught her breath as she turned; she'd forgotten the pier glass mirror in the corner and for a moment was frightened by the strong, dumpy woman in uniform and cap looking defiantly from the spotted glass. Until she recognized herself. Shrugging, she pulled the light cord and limped to her room, determined to get a good night's sleep. Tomorrow she must leave for the hospital, and before she left, she had a good many things to do.

**“B**ut you *can't* go and leave me with just Millie, Bea. Who will do the *laundry*?” The Madam came as close to wailing as Bea had ever heard. “Ella’s husband said her arm would have to be in a plaster cast for six weeks, Bea.”

“I know, Madam, you asked me to listen on the extension in the kitchen. Millie’ll be able to manage the laundry, too, I’m sure of that. Them new curtains you ordered came yesterday. They’re drip dry and that’ll cut down her time on the mangle, for one thing.” Bea laid the Sunday paper, still warm from the oven, on the white marble-topped table by the bedroom windows. “Silly of Ella to wear them headphones crossing the street, no wonder she got bumped by a car. Lucky it’s only a cracked elbow.”

“Oh, dear. Well, so far that Millie’s been clean; we’ll just have to see.”

“Millie’ll do just fine. Now, if you’ll just sign the checks for Clarence and Ella and Millie—” Bea had long ago been given charge of the Madam’s checkbook: bills and statements that came by mail would surely have been handled by people with colds, flu, worse things.

Pulling on a pair of gloves, Miss Safford quickly scribbled her name on the lines, barely looking at them. “Everything is paid ahead, Bea? Do be sure. Light and gas, a deposit at the market for Millie to draw on, all the things?” Her smooth little face, crowned

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with twisted ropes of still bright black hair, looked almost panicky. "It's going to be a terrible time without you, Bea."

"You'll be all right, Madam, you really will."

The taxi was ordered for two, and there was just time once she'd tidied the kitchen after Madam's lunch and watched Clarence drive away for his afternoon at the movies to pull herself up the stairs one last time. The Madam's discarded morning clothes lay on the bed, ready for the wash. As usual, the Madam was in the bathroom putting on a clean wrapper. Bea stood by the chaise longue and took up the lacy wool comforter; the Madam didn't like to feel cool when she had her little rest after luncheon.

And when she'd taken care of the Madam, there was the bath to do and the laundry to go down and the clean towels and all to put out, and after that her suitcase and coat were by the kitchen door, and her old handbag with money to pay the taxi driver, and the new magazine Millie'd brought her yesterday "for something to read in the hospital."

"Yeah, a good styling and a perm, that's what I want." Millie stretched out luxuriously in the beauty parlor smock and yawned. "Manicure, too, if you've got the time. I sure got plenty, Vonda. You know, I got out to that crazy place there like I was supposed to at seven this morning, and there was a note for me under the mat instead of the key. Check for two months' pay, and Bea wrote the Madam'd gone to a hotel in the city after all, her laundress had a broken arm and the work was too much for one person. Think of that! So me, I got a paid vacation for eight weeks."

"Nice work if you can get it, Millie," the hairdresser smiled back, lifting her scissors and wondering where on earth to begin on Millie's hair this time. A henna rinse after the perm, that was for sure.

**B**ea stepped down off the county bus as if she'd never had any trouble at all; she felt as supple as a girl and even the two-day ride on the Greyhound down here hadn't bothered her. She'd only had to stay in the convalescent place ten days after all, she'd done so well, and now as the county bus moved slowly on down the narrow road, she felt young for the first time in many years.

Kentucky. Kind of pretty, even now in November with all the

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trees bare, and she could smell the woodsmoke even this far from the old wood house beyond the sheep shed up the dirt path. A rooster crowed; in the still, cold air the sound came close, too, as did the scent from a healthy manure heap as she passed the barn.

The old man inside the little house fought to see through the enclooming cataracts on his eyes; a large, heavy-set woman was in the room, she had a big suitcase. Her knock on the warped door had been firm, polite but firm, and so was her voice now, firm and warm as she took his hand in hers.

"Hello, Pop. Your Bert, he sent me. Our Bert. I'm late, years late, but I'm here. I'll see to the chickens and sheep in a little bit, I like farms, but let me sit down now and tell you all about it. I'm Bea, Pop, Bert's Bea, and it's been a long, long time."

Ella, who had spent some needed time in a dentist's chair while her elbow was mending, flashed an expensive gold smile to herself in her shiny patent leather handbag as she fished out her key to the cellar stairs. Two months, Bea'd said in her note when she'd mailed the check; the Madam'd be in the hotel two months. Well, it was time to get back to work. From the outside the house didn't look like anybody was in it yet, but if anything was sure, it was death, taxes, and a hell of a lot of laundry waiting down cellar.

There was. The basement was hotter than usual and dry as a desert. No steam from the washer all this time, and Bea seemed to have turned up the dehumidifier, too, before she left. Ella shrugged her coat off and dug the morning's first cassette out of her pocket, slapped on the headphones before she pulled at the rope to let the laundry in the slatted cage above tumble out on the table. Even after two months, it was snowy white, the usual weekend's accumulation, but Ella began to scream and scream, trying to hear herself over the Walkman headphones. For in the usual mass of white, white wash was the only dark object she'd ever seen in the laundry, the dead and dried body of the Madam herself, all in white, too, of course, and tumbled within the lacy wool comforter, but her skin had darkened and her long rope of black hair sprang wildly from her shrunken, mummified face and writhed wildly among the great mounds of white linen.

Ready for the wash.



FICTION

# Fast Burn

by Loren D.  
Estleman



*Illustration by Ray Lago*

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**T**he old man wrestled open my inner office door and held it with a shoulder while he worked his way inside, supporting himself on two steel canes and dragging one foot behind him that clanked when he let his weight down on it. He had a corrugated brow and a long loose face of that medium gray that very black skin sometimes turns with age, shot through with concentration and pain. His brown suit bagged at the knees and no two buttons on the jacket matched.

At that moment I was up to my wrists in typewriter ribbon, changing spools on the venerable Underwood portable that came with the office, and unable to get up from behind my desk to assist him, not that he looked like someone who was accustomed to receiving help from anyone. I simply said hello and nodded toward the customer's chair on his side. While I threaded the ribbon through the various forks, hooks, and prongs I heard him lower himself thankfully onto semisoft vinyl and make the little metallic snicking noises that went with undoing the braces securing the canes to his wrists.

I took my time, giving him breathing space. Going to see a private investigator isn't like visiting the dentist. I come at the desperate end of the long line of friends, relatives, friends

of relatives, friends of friends, and guys around the corner whose friends owe him favors. By the time the potential client gets around to me he's admitted that his problem has grown beyond him and his circle. So I let this one resign himself to the last stop before the abyss and didn't realize until I looked up again that I was playing host to a dead man.

You know dead once you've seen it a few times, and the old man's cocked head and black, open mouth with spittle hanging at one corner and the glittering crescents of his half-open eyes said it even as I got up and moved around the desk to feel his neck for an artery he didn't need any longer. His face was four shades darker than it had been coming in, and bunched like a fist. He'd suffered six kinds of hell in that last quiet moment.

I broke a pair of surgical gloves out of a package I keep in the desk, put them on, and went through his pockets. When someone dies in a room you pay rent on, it's only polite to learn who he is. If the driver's license in his dilapidated wallet was valid, his name was Emmett Gooding and he lived—had lived—on Mt. Elliott near the cemetery. What a crippled old man was doing still driving was between him and the Michigan secretary of state's office. There

were twelve dollars in the wallet and a ring of keys in his right pants pocket, nothing else on him except a handful of pocket lint and a once-white handkerchief that crackled when unfolded. He was wearing a steel brace on his left leg. I put everything back where I'd found it and dialed 911.

The prowler car cop who showed up ten minutes later looked about seventeen, with no hair on his face and no promise of it and a glossy black visor screwed down to the eyes. He put on gloves of his own to feel Gooding's neck and told me after a minute that he was dead.

"That's why I called," I said, knocking ash off a Winston into the souvenir ashtray on my desk. "I wanted a second opinion."

"You kill him?" He laid a hand on his side arm.

"I'll answer that question when it counts."

Creases marred the freckles under his eyes. "When's that?"

"Now." I nodded at the first of two plainclothesmen coming in the door. He was a slender black with a Fu Manchu mustache and coils of gray hair like steel wool at his temples, wearing the kind of electric blue suit that looks like hell on anybody but him. I knew him as Sergeant Blake, having seen him around Detroit police headquarters but not often enough

to talk to. His companion was white, short, fifteen pounds too heavy for department regs, and a good ten years too old for active duty. He had a brush cut, jug ears, and so much upper lip it hung down over the hollow in his chin. I didn't know him from Sam's cat. You can live in a city the size of Detroit a long time and never get to know all the cops on the detective force if you're lucky.

Blake's flat eyes slid over the stiff quickly and lit on the uniform as he flashed his badge and ID. "Anything?"

"Just what's here, sarge," reported the youngster, and handed me a glance meant to be hard. "Suspect's uncooperative."

"Okay, crash." And the uniform was off the case. When he had gone: "They're running too small to keep these days."

The short fat cop grunted.

"Amos Walker, right?" Blake looked at me for the first time. I nodded. "This is my partner, Officer Fister. Who's the dead guy?"

I said I didn't know and gave him the story, leaving out the part about searching the body. Cops consider that their province, which it is. Fister meanwhile wrapped a handkerchief around his fingers and drew the dead man's wallet out of his inside breast pocket. He had probably run out of surgical gloves

years ago. He read off what mattered on the driver's license and inventoried the other contents. Blake watched me carefully while this was going on, and I made my face just as carefully blank. At length he gave a little shrug. That was it until the medical examiner arrived with his black metal case and glanced at Gooding's discolored face and looked at his fingers and took off the dead man's right shoe and sock and examined the bottom of his foot and then put all his instruments back in the case, humming to himself. He was a young Oriental. They are almost always Orientals; I think it has something to do with ancestor worship.

Blake looked at him, and the M.E. said, "Massive coronary. We'll root around inside and spend a hunk of taxpayers' money on tests and it'll still come out massive coronary. When their faces turn that shade and there's evidence of an earlier stroke"—he indicated the leg brace, part of which showed under the dead man's pantsleg—"it can't be much else."

The sergeant thanked him and when the expert left had me tell the story again for Fister's notepad and then again just for fun while the white coats came to bag the body and cart it down to the wagon. "Any

ideas about why he came here?" Blake asked. I shook my head. He sighed. "Okay. We might need your statement later if Charlie Chan turns out to be wrong about the heart attack."

"He didn't act like someone who's been wrong recently," I said.

Fister grunted again. "Tell me. I never met one of them croakers that didn't think his sweat smelled like lilacs."

On that sparkling note they left me.

I spent the rest of the week tailing a state senator's aide around Lansing for his wife in Detroit, who was curious about the weekends he was spending at the office. Turned out he had a wife in the state capital, too. I was grinning my way through my typewritten report at the desk when Sergeant Blake came in. He wore a tired look and the same shocking blue suit. There couldn't be another like it in the city.

"You're off the hook," he announced. "Gooding's heart blew, like the M.E. said. We checked him out. He was on the line at the Dearborn plant till he took his mandatory four years ago. Worked part time flagging cars during road construction for the county, had a stroke last year, and quit. No family. Papers in his dump on Mt. Elliott said he was getting set to check

into a nursing home on Dequindre. Staff at the home expected him this week. Next to his phone we found Monday's *Free Press* folded to an article about employee theft that mentioned you as an investigator and the Yellow Pages open to the page with your number."

"That was a feature piece about a lot of dead cases." I stapled the report. "What did he want with me?"

"*Quién sabe?* Maybe he thought this was the elephant graveyard for old Ford workers. I'd care if he died any way but natural."

"Okay if I look into it?"

"Why? There's no one to stand your fee."

"He came looking for help with something. I'd like to know what it was."

"It's your time." He opened the door.

"Thanks for coming down, sergeant. You could have called."

"I'm on my way home. I dropped off a uniform to drive Gooding's car to the impound. We found it in the lot next door."

He went out and I got up to file my carbon of the report to the woman with the generous husband. The window behind the desk started chattering, followed an instant later by a massive hollow *crump* that rang my telephone bell. At first I thought

it was the ancient furnace blowing. Then I remembered it was June and got my .38 out of the desk. I almost bumped into Blake standing in the hall with his Police Special drawn. He glanced at me without saying anything, and together we clattered down three flights to the street. Something that wasn't an automobile any longer squatted in a row of vehicles in the parking lot next to my building with its hood and doors sprung and balls of orange flame rolling out of its shattered windows, pouring black smoke into the smog layer overhead. Sirens keened in the distance, years too late to help the officer cooking in the front seat.

**S**hadows were congealing when I got away from headquarters, dry-mouthed from talking to a tape recorder and damp under the arms from Sergeant Blake's enthusiastic interrogation. The bomb squad was still looking at the charred husk of Gooding's car, but it was a fair bet that a healthy charge had been rigged to the ignition. Gooding was homicide's meat now, and my permission to investigate his interest in me had died with the uniformed cop. So I called an old acquaintance in personnel at the City-County Building from a public booth and asked for information on the old man's

brief employment with the Road Commission; if I'd had brains to begin with I would have invested in two chinchillas instead of a license and waited for spring. My acquaintance promised to get back to me next day during business hours. I hung up and drove to Dearborn, where no one working the late shift at the Ford plant had ever heard of Emmett Gooding. The turnover in the auto industry is worse than McDonald's. I caught the last guy in personnel just as he was leaving his office, flashed my ID, and told him I was running a credit check on Gooding for a finance company. He was small, with a bald head and a very black pointed beard. Reluctantly he agreed to go back in and pull the old man's file.

He scowled at the papers in the manila folder.

"He was a steady worker, didn't take as many sick days as you might expect from someone nearing mandatory retirement. Turned down a foreman's job twice in eighteen years. No surprise. It was a thankless position, not worth the raise."

"Is there anyone still working here who knew him?" I asked.

"Probably not. A robot's doing his job these days." He winced. "I had a computer expert in here recently bragging about how the machines free workers

from inhuman jobs to explore their true potential. In my day we called it unemployment."

There was nothing in that for me, so I thanked him and got up.

His eyes followed me. "What's a man Gooding's age want with a loan?"

"He's buying a hot tub," I explained, and got out of there.

That was it for one day. I had a bill to make out for the bigamist's wife, and contrary to what you read, private stars don't often work at night, when most sources are closed. The bill complete, I caught a senile pork chop and a handful of wilted fries at the diner down the street from my office and went home. There was just a black spot on the parking lot pavement where Gooding's car had stood.

After breakfast the next morning I drove down to the City-County Building, making a gun out of my index finger and snapping a shot at the statue of the Spirit of Detroit on my way in. The Green Giant, as we call it, was still threatening to crush the family he was holding in one hand with the globe he was gripping in the other. The blunt instrument symbolized Progress.

I owed my contact in personnel to having sprung his younger brother from a charge of assaulting a police officer upon

producing evidence that the cop had a habit of trying to pull moving violators out of their cars through the vent windows before such windows went out of fashion. It had cost me some good will at police headquarters, but the access to confidential records was worth it. My man looked like fourteen trying to pass for forty, with freckles, hornrims, and short sandy hair parted with a protractor. Never mind his name.

"What you got?" I slung myself into the treacherous scoop chair in front of his gray metal desk and lit up.

He pushed a spotless white ashtray my way. He was one of those non-smokers who didn't mind a little more pollution in a sky already the color of sardines. "Not a lot," he said. "Gooding was with the Road Commission off and on, mostly off, for only about five months before taking a medical." He told me which months. I wrote them down in my notebook.

"What sort of worker was he?"

"How good do you have to be to hold up a sign? Nothing remarkable on his work sheet; I guess he was reliable."

"Where'd he work?"

He started to read off street names, quadrant numbers, and dates from the printout sheet on his desk, then swore and slid it across to me. I wrote them

down, too, along with the foreman's name and home telephone number. "Anything else?"

"Nothing the computer noticed," he said.

"Okay, thanks." I got up, shook his hand, and went through the door, or almost. Blake and Fister were on their way in. The sergeant's fist was raised to rap on the door. When he saw me, I pulled my head back out of range. He hesitated, then uncurled his fingers and smoothed down one side of his *Fu Manchu*. He said: "I should have guessed. The guy in Dearborn said someone was around asking about Gooding last night."

"Good morning, sergeant," I said. "Officer."

"Let's clink him for interfering in a police investigation," suggested Fister. His long upper lip was skinned back to his gums, exposing teeth the shade of old plaster.

Blake ignored him. "You're screwing around with your license, Walker."

"Not technically, since I'm not working for anyone."

Fister said, "The law ain't in books, pal. It's here standing in front of you."

"Don't let us walk on your heels a second time," the sergeant said evenly. "We'll bend you till you break."

He walked around me into the office, followed a half-sec-



ond later by his trained dog.

The foreman's name was Lawler. I tried his home number from a booth, got no answer, and called the county dispatcher's office, where a dead-voiced secretary informed me Lawler was due at a road construction site on Dequindre at two. That gave me three hours. I coaxed my heap up Woodward to the Detroit public library and spent the time in the microfilm room reading copies of the *News* and *Free Press* for the dates Gooding had worked flagging cars. No major robberies or hits had taken place in those vicinities at the time. So much for the theory that he had seen someone driving through whom he was better off not seeing. Rubbing floating type out of my eyes, I put a hamburger out of its misery at a lunch counter on Warren and took the Chrysler north to Dequindre. On the way I flipped on the radio in the middle of a news report about the bombing outside my office building. The announcer managed to get my name right, but that was about all.

A crew of eight were taking turns shoveling gravel and Elmer's Glue into a single pothole the size of a dimple at Remington. They would tip the stuff into the hole, pat it down, then

walk half a block back to the truck for another load. Even then it didn't look as if they could make the job last until quitting time, but you never know. A hardhat crowding fifty, with a great firm belly and sleeves rolled back past thick forearms burned to a dark cherry color, stood with one work shoe propped on the truck's rear bumper, eyes like twin slivers of blue glass watching the operation through the smoke of his cigarette. They didn't move as I pulled my car off to the side a safe distance from the county vehicle and got out. "Mr. Lawler?"

His only reaction was to reach up with a crusted forefinger and flick ash off his cigarette without removing it from between his lips. Since the gesture seemed more positive than negative, I gave him a look at my license photostat and told him what I was doing there. "Gooding ran interference for your crew," I wound up. "What can you tell me about him?"

"He knew which side of the sign said 'Stop' and which said 'Slow.'"

"Anything else?"

"Anything meaning what?" He still wasn't looking at me.

You run into him in every profession, the one bee in the hive that would rather sting than make honey. "Look," I said, "I'm just earning a living,

like you and the lightning corps here. You look like someone who's talked to investigators; you know what I want. How did the old man get along with the other workers? Did you notice if there were any he was especially friendly with, or especially not friendly with? Did you overhear one of them saying something like, 'Gooding, I don't like you and I'm going to blow you up in your car'? Little things like that."

He flicked off some more ash. "I talked to investigators," he acknowledged. "Two years ago I seen a car run a stop sign on Jefferson and knock down a kid crossing the street. When I was getting set to testify against the driver, his lawyer hired a detective to follow me around from bar to bar and prove in court I was a drunk and an unreliable witness. Yeah," he said, spitting out the butt, "I talked to investigators."

He walked away to look down into the pothole. I stood there for a moment, peeling cellophane off a fresh pack of Winstons. When he didn't return I put one in my mouth and went back to my car. A lanky black with a scar on his jaw and his hardhat balanced precariously on the back of his head climbed into the passenger's seat.

"I heard you talking to Lawler, mister." He talked through a sunny grin that brightened

the interior. "He's not a bad dude; he's just had a run of bad luck."

"Must be tough." I touched a match to my weed and shook it out. Waiting.

"I knew Emmett Gooding some," he said.

I waited some more, looking at him. His grin was fixed. I got out my wallet and held up a ten-spot between the first and second fingers of my right hand. When he reached for it, I pulled it back. He shrugged and sat back, still grinning. "Not enough to say much more than 'hello' to," he went on. "There's like a wall around those old men, you know? Except to Jamie."

"Jamie?"

"James Dunrather, I think his right name was. White dude, about twenty-two. Long greasy blond hair and pimples. Lawler canned him a couple weeks back for selling dope on the job." He shook his head. "Ugly scene, man. He kept screaming about how he could get Lawler killed. Lawler just laughed."

I scraped some dust off the dash with the edge of the bill. "Dunrather and Gooding were friends?"

"Not friends. Jamie had a way of talking at you till you had to say something back just to get him to stop. I seen him talking at the old man that way on lunch break. Not the old man exclusive, mind you, just

at anybody close. Gooding was the only one that didn't bother to get up and walk away."

"What'd he talk about?"

"Mostly he bragged about what a bad dude he was and all the bad dudes he knew. What you expect to hear from a part-time pusher. Then Gooding got sick and quit. But he come back."

"To work?"

He shook his head again. "He come to where we was tearing up pavement on Eight Mile. It was about a week before Jamie got canned. Man, Gooding looked about a hundred, leaning on those canes. He talked to Jamie for maybe ten minutes and then left in that beat-up Pontiac of his."

"Rest of us might've been in Mississippi for all the notice he took of us."

"You didn't hear what they were talking about?"

"Man, when that Rotomill starts ripping up asphalt—"

"Yeah," I said. "Where can I find this Dunrath?"

He shrugged, eyeing the saw-buck in my hand. I gave it to him.

"Hope that's worth the job." I nodded through the windshield at Lawler, watching us from beside the pothole. My angel grinned with one foot on the pavement.

"Affirmative Action, man," he said. "It's a sweet country."

I made contact with Barry Stackpole at the *News*, who kept a personal file on street-level talent for his column.

Jamie Dunrath had a record as long as Woodward Avenue for pushing pot and controlled substances, but no convictions, and an alias for each of his many addresses. Recent information had him living in a walkup over an adult bookstore on Watson. I promised Barry a dinner and tooled downtown.

There was a drunk snoring on the bottom step inside the street door with flies crawling on his face. I climbed over him and up a narrow squawking staircase with a gnawed rubber runner between mustard walls sprayed all over with words to live by. The upstairs hallway smelled of mold and thick paint that was fresh when Ford started paying five dollars a day. The building was as real as a stained Band-Aid on the floor of a YMCA pool. I rapped on Dunrath's door and flattened out against the wall next to the hinges, gripping the butt of my .38 in its belt clip. When no bullets splintered the panel, I tried the knob. It gave.

Unclipping the gun, I pushed the door open slowly, going in with it to avoid being framed in the doorway. The shade was drawn over the room's only window, but enough light leaked in around it to fall on a ladder-

back chair mottled with old white paint, a dented table holding up a dirty china lamp and a portable TV, and a bed with a painted iron frame. The man dangling from the overhead fixture cast a gently drifting shadow as he twisted in the current of air stirring through the open door. He had a flexible wire like they hang pictures with sunk in the flesh of his neck and his frog eyes and extended tongue were pale against his purple face. He was wearing faded jeans and track shoes and a red T-shirt with white letters that said "Make Only Big Mistakes." You had to smile.

A floorboard sighed behind me while I was comparing the dead man's acned complexion and lank dishwater locks to my informant's description of Jamie Dunrath. I turned about a century too late. Later I thought I'd heard the swish, but all I was sure of was a bolt of white pain and a black mouth swallowing me.

**"P**ut this where it hurts and shut up."

I'd expected gentler words on my way through the gates, but after staring for a moment at the wet handkerchief folded on the dusky pink palm I accepted it. I found the sticky lump behind my left ear with no trouble and almost passed out when the

cold, damp cloth touched the pulpy mass. Bitter bile climbed my throat. My thick tongue made me think of Dunrath and thought of Dunrath made the bile rise. I swallowed, vaguely conscious of having spoken.

"Did I say anything worth holding against me?"

Sergeant Blake ignored the question. He was sitting on the ladderback chair with his hands on his knees and his face too far from the floor where I was lying for me to make out. But I recognized his suit. Now I became aware of movement around me, and spotted the white coats from the morgue. They had freed the body and were wrapping it. Fister stood by watching.

"Bag his hands," Blake told them. To me: "I'm betting the wire made those cuts on his palms. He wouldn't grab it that tight unless he was trying to save his life. It wasn't suicide."

I said, "The guy who slugged me must've been hiding behind the door. He had to go past the drunk on the stairs on his way out. Maybe he saw something."

"The drunk's at headquarters now. But he was as gone as you, and the guy took the service stairs out back when he heard us coming. We found this on the steps." He tossed my wallet onto my chest. "It's been dusted. He wore gloves. If he didn't

know who you were before, he knows now. Feed it to me."

I fed it to him, starting with what I'd learned at the road construction site. From past experience I didn't try to sit up. A pillow from the iron bed was under my head, which was full of bass fiddles tuning up.

"I say clink him," Fister put in. "It's his putzing around scared the killer into icing Dunrath."

"Unless Dunrath killed Gooding," I said.

Blake said, "No, it's good business not to clog up an investigation with too many killers. We got the same information you did by threatening to take Lawler downtown, and traced Dunrath through the computer. On our way up here we heard a street door slam on the other side of the building. Those new security places with no fire exits to speak of spoiled us; we didn't think to look for a back way."

I turned the handkerchief around to the cool side. "The bombing story hit the airwaves this afternoon. He's mopping up. Dunrath was a braggart, a poor risk."

"Everything about this case screams contract," the sergeant considered. "Except Gooding. There's no reason a pro would bother with an old man like that, and he couldn't have expected anyone but Gooding to

blow up in Gooding's car."

I said, "He's too sloppy for a pro anyway. If a seasoned heavyweight wanted Dunrath's death to look like suicide he wouldn't have let him cut up his hands that way."

"Now he knows who you are and how close you are, whoever he is, I guess maybe we saved your butt by coming in when we did."

"You never get a flat tire when you need one," Fister said distastefully.

Blake leaned his forearms on his knees. "Cop killings are messy, Walker. Third parties tend to stop lead. It doesn't matter much to the guy who stops it whether it came from a Saturday night buster or a Police Special. Fister will type up your statement and we'll collect your signature later. You want a ride home?" He stood.

"My crate's parked around the corner," I said, sitting up slowly. The fiddles were louder in that position. "And your good cop, bad cop number's wasted on me."

"You're cluttering up the murder scene, Hot Wit." He held out my dented hat and gun, retrieved from the floor.

**Y**ou can't live on the edge all the time, check behind all the doors and under all the beds, and still be the kind of man who

reads *Playboy*. But if you're lucky enough not to and live, it makes you alert enough next time to spot things like a cigarette end glowing like a single orange eye in the gloom behind your office window on your way to the front door of your building. I did, and forced my echoing skull to remember whether I'd locked the inner sanctum. Then I decided remembering didn't matter because people who don't mean you harm don't smoke in strange rooms while dusk is gathering without turning on a light.

I mounted the stairs like anyone else returning to his business just before closing, but slower than usual, thinking. You get a lot of thinking done in three flights. By the time I reached my floor I was pretty sure why Emmett Gooding had been marked for death, though I didn't know by whom, and none of it made sense anyway. It rarely does outside Nero Wolfe.

I walked right past the outer office door and through the one next to that, closing it behind me. My neighbor that week was a travel agent with one telephone and one desk and posters of places that looked nothing like Detroit on the walls. The agent's narrow sad brown face lit up when I entered, fell when he recognized me, and registered curiosity when I lifted his

receiver and dialed police headquarters.

Sergeant Blake had just returned. When his voice finally came on the line, I said, "How sure are you Emmett Gooding left no survivors?"

"Why?" Suspicion curled like smoke out of the earpiece.

"Because someone had to be named beneficiary on his life insurance policy."

"Who told you he had one?"

"You just did. Who is it?"

"I'm reading the report now. Twenty-five thousand goes to a girl out on the Coast, the daughter of an old friend who worked with Gooding on the line at Dearborn till he died nine years ago. But she hasn't left San Francisco this year."

"Double indemnity?" I pressed. "Fifty grand if he died by accident or mayhem?"

"Why ask me if you know? And how do you know?" I told him I was a detective. After a pause he said, "Anything else, or can I go home and introduce myself to my wife?"

"Do that. On the way you might stop by and pick up your cop-killer. He's waiting for me in my office."

The pause this time was longer. "Where are you?"

I told him.

"Okay, sit tight."

"What if he tries to leave?"

"Stop him." The line went dead.

I hung up and offered the travel agent a cigarette, but he wasn't seeing the pack. He'd overheard everything. I lit one for myself and asked him if he'd sent anyone anywhere lately.

"Just my ex-wife and her boyfriend," he replied, coming out of it. "To Tahiti. On my alimony."

I grinned, but he could see my heart wasn't in it. The conversation flagged. I smoked and waited.

There had to be an insurance policy for Gooding to have done what he did. It had been done before, but the victims were always family men and any half-smart cop could wrap it up in an hour. Single men like my almost-client who had outlived whatever family or friends they'd had tended to throw off everyone but hunch-players like me and tireless pros like Blake who touched all the bases no matter how hopeless.

At two minutes past five I heard the door to my outer office close softly. Swearing quietly, I killed my butt in the travel agent's ashtray and advised him to climb under his desk. I didn't have to tell him twice. I moved out into the hallway with gun in hand.

His skinny back, clad in an army fatigue shirt, long black hair spilling to his shoulders, was just disappearing down the stairwell. I strode to the top of

the stairs and cocked the .38. The noise made echoes. He started to turn. The overhead light painted a streak along the .45 automatic in his right hand.

"Uh-uh," I cautioned.

He froze in mid-turn. He wasn't much older than Dunrather, with a droopy mustache that was mostly fuzz and a bulbous lower lip like a baby's. He was a third of the way down the flight.

"Junior button man," I sneered. "What'd Gooding pay you, a hundred?"

"Five hundred." His voice was as young as the rest of him. "He said it was all he had."

"He wasted it. He was a sick old man with nothing to look forward to but a nursing home. So like a lot of other sick old men he decided to go for the fast burn. But suicide would've voided his insurance and he wanted his dead friend's daughter to get something out of his death. The stroke made up his mind. He remembered Jamie Dunrather bragging about all the bad cats he knew, got your name from him, and paid you to take him out."

"I didn't want to get mixed up in no cop-killing," he said. "Who knew the old man was going to conk and someone else would eat that charge I stuck under his hood?"

"So when you heard about it, you started covering your tracks.



You cooled Dunrather, and you would have cooled me, too, if the cops hadn't interrupted you." His thick lower lip dropped a millimeter. I pressed on. "You didn't know it was the cops, did you? You knew Gooding had been to see me, you thought he'd told me everything, and you figured that by waiting for me back here you could ambush me and be in the clear."

"Why not? When you didn't show by quitting time I decided to hit you at home. You was all I had to worry about, I thought."

"Pros give the cops more credit than that," I said. "But you'll never be a pro."

The air freshened in the stairwell, as if someone had opened the street door. I was talking to draw his attention from it. His knuckles whitened around the automatic's grip, and I saw he was wearing transparent rubber gloves.

"What'd he want to come see you for anyway?" he demanded.

"He changed his mind. When it came down to it, he didn't really want to die. When he couldn't find you to call it off, he was going to hire me to look for you. He read my name in the paper and that gave him the idea."

He made a thin, keening sound between his teeth and twisted around the rest of his

way, straightening his gun arm.

"Police! Drop it!"

A pro would have gone ahead and felled me, then tended to Blake on the second landing, but I was right about him. He swung back to fire down the stairs. Blake and I opened up at the same time. The reports of our .38's battered the walls. The man in the fatigue shirt dropped his .45 clattering down the steps, gripped the bannister, and slid three feet before sliding off and piling into a heap of army surplus halfway down the flight.

In the echoing silence that followed, Officer Fister, who had entered the building a second behind his partner, bounded past Blake and bent to feel the man's neck for a pulse. He straightened after a moment. "He's killed his last cop."

"The hell with him," said the sergeant, holstering his gun under his left arm. Smoke curled spastically up the stairwell.

The dead man's name turned out to be Jarvis, and he had been questioned and released in connection with three unsolved homicides in the past year and a half. I didn't know him from Sam's cat. You can live in a city the size of Detroit a long time and never get to know all the killers if you're lucky.

MYSTERY CLASSIC



# The Boarded Window

by Ambrose Bierce



*Illustration by Mark Fresh*

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**I**n 1830, only a few miles away from what is now the great city of Cincinnati, lay an immense and almost unbroken forest. The whole region was sparsely settled by people of the frontier—restless souls who no sooner had hewn fairly habitable homes out of the wilderness and attained to that degree of prosperity which today we should call indigence than, impelled by some mysterious impulse of their nature, they abandoned all and pushed farther westward, to encounter new perils and privations in the effort to regain the meagre comforts which they had voluntarily renounced. Many of them had already forsaken that region for the remoter settlements, but among those remaining was one who had been of those first arriving. He lived alone in a house of logs surrounded on all sides by the great forest, of whose gloom and silence he seemed a part, for no one had ever known him to smile nor speak a needless word. His simple wants were supplied by the sale or barter of skins of wild animals in the river town, for not a thing did he grow upon the land which, if needful, he might have claimed by right of undisturbed possession. There were evidences of “improvement”—a few acres of ground immediately about the house had once been cleared of its trees, the decayed stumps of which were half concealed by the new growth that had been suffered to repair the ravage wrought by the ax. Apparently the man’s zeal for agriculture had burned with a failing flame, expiring in penitential ashes.

The little log house, with its chimney of sticks, its roof of warping clapboards weighted with traversing poles and its “chinking” of clay, had a single door and, directly opposite, a window. The latter, however, was boarded up—nobody could remember a time when it was not. And none knew why it was so closed; certainly not because of the occupant’s dislike of light and air, for on those rare occasions when a hunter had passed that lonely spot the recluse had commonly been seen sunning himself on his doorstep if heaven had provided sunshine for his need. I fancy there are few persons living today who ever knew the secret of that window, but I am one, as you shall see.

The man’s name was said to be Murlock. He was apparently seventy years old, actually about fifty. Something besides years had had a hand in his aging. His hair and long, full beard were white, his gray, lustreless eyes sunken, his face singularly seamed with wrinkles which appeared to belong to two intersecting systems. In figure he was tall and spare, with a stoop of the shoul-

ders—a burden bearer. I never saw him; these particulars I learned from my grandfather, from whom also I got the man's story when I was a lad. He had known him when living nearby in that early day.

One day Murlock was found in his cabin, dead. It was not a time and place for coroners and newspapers, and I suppose it was agreed that he had died from natural causes or I should have been told, and should remember. I know only that with what was probably a sense of the fitness of things the body was buried near the cabin, alongside the grave of his wife, who had preceded him by so many years that local tradition had retained hardly a hint of her existence. That closes the final chapter of this true story—excepting, indeed, the circumstance that many years afterward, in company with an equally intrepid spirit, I penetrated to the place and ventured near enough to the ruined cabin to throw a stone against it, and ran away to avoid the ghost which every well-informed boy thereabout knew haunted the spot. But there is an earlier chapter—that supplied by my grandfather.

When Murlock built his cabin and began laying sturdily about with his ax to hew out a farm—the rifle, meanwhile, his means of support—he was young, strong, and full of hope. In that eastern country whence he came he had married, as was the fashion, a young woman in all ways worthy of his honest devotion, who shared the dangers and privations of his lot with a willing spirit and light heart. There is no known record of her name; of her charms of mind and person tradition is silent and the doubter is at liberty to entertain his doubt; but God forbid that I should share it! Of their affection and happiness there is abundant assurance in every added day of the man's widowed life; for what but the magnetism of a blessed memory could have chained that venturesome spirit to a lot like that?

One day Murlock returned from gunning in a distant part of the forest to find his wife prostrate with fever, and delirious. There was no physician within miles, no neighbor; nor was she in a condition to be left, to summon help. So he set about the task of nursing her back to health, but at the end of the third day she fell into unconsciousness and so passed away, apparently, with never a gleam of returning reason.

From what we know of a nature like this we may venture to sketch in some of the details of the outline picture drawn by my grandfather. When convinced she was dead, Murlock had sense enough to remember that the dead must be prepared for burial. In

performance of this sacred duty he blundered now and again, did certain things incorrectly, and others which he did correctly were done over and over. His occasional failures to accomplish some simple and ordinary act filled him with astonishment, like that of a drunken man who wonders at the suspension of familiar natural laws. He was surprised, too, that he did not weep—surprised and a little ashamed; surely it is unkind not to weep for the dead. "Tomorrow," he said aloud, "I shall have to make the coffin and dig the grave; and then I shall miss her, when she is no longer in sight; but now—she is dead, of course, but it is all right—it *must* be all right, somehow. Things cannot be so bad as they seem."

He stood over the body in the fading light, adjusting the hair and putting the finishing touches to the simple toilet, doing all mechanically, with soulless care. And still through his consciousness ran an undersense of conviction that all was right—that he should have her again as before, and everything explained. He had had no experience in grief; his capacity had not been enlarged by use. His heart could not contain it all, nor his imagination rightly conceive it. He did not know he was so hard struck; *that* knowledge would come later, and never go. Grief is an artist of powers as various as the instruments upon which he plays his dirges for the dead, evoking from some the sharpest, shrillest notes, from others the low, grave chords that throb recurrent like the slow beating of a distant drum. Some natures it startles; some it stupefies. To one it comes like the stroke of an arrow, stinging all the sensibilities to a keener life; to another as the blow of a bludgeon, which in crushing benumbs. We may conceive Murlock to have been that way affected, for (and here we are upon surer ground than that of conjecture) no sooner had he finished his pious work than, sinking into a chair by the side of the table upon which the body lay, and noting how white the profile showed in the deepening gloom, he laid his arms upon the table's edge, and dropped his face into them, tearless yet and unutterably weary. At that moment came in through the open window a long, wailing sound like the cry of a lost child in the far deeps of the darkening wood! But the man did not move. Again, and nearer than before, sounded that unearthly cry upon his failing sense. Perhaps it was a wild beast; perhaps it was a dream. For Murlock was asleep.

Some hours later, as it afterward appeared, this unfaithful watcher awoke and lifting his head from his arms intently listened—he knew not why. There in the black darkness by the side of the dead, recalling all without a shock, he strained his eyes to

see—he knew not what. His senses were all alert, his breath was suspended, his blood had stilled its tides as if to assist the silence. Who—what had waked him, and where was it?

Suddenly the table shook beneath his arms, and at the same moment he heard, or fancied that he heard, a light, soft step—another—sounds as of bare feet upon the floor!

He was terrified beyond the power to cry out or move. Perforce he waited—waited there in the darkness through seeming centuries of such dread as one may know, yet live to tell. He tried vainly to speak the dead woman's name, vainly to stretch forth his hand across the table to learn if she were there. His throat was powerless, his arms and hands were like lead. Then occurred something most frightful. Some heavy body seemed hurled against the table with an impetus that pushed it against his breast so sharply as nearly to overthrow him, and at the same instant he heard and felt the fall of something upon the floor with so violent a thump that the whole house was shaken by the impact. A scuffling ensued, and a confusion of sounds impossible to describe. Murlock had risen to his feet. Fear had by excess forfeited control of his faculties. He flung his hands upon the table. Nothing was there!

There is a point at which terror may turn to madness; and madness incites to action. With no definite intent, from no motive but the wayward impulse of a madman, Murlock sprang to the wall, with a little groping seized his loaded rifle, and without aim discharged it. By the flash which lit up the room with a vivid illumination, he saw an enormous panther dragging the dead woman toward the window, its teeth fixed in her throat! Then there were darkness blacker than before, and silence; and when he returned to consciousness the sun was high and the wood vocal with songs of birds.

The body lay near the window, where the beast had left it when frightened away by the flash and report of the rifle. The clothing was deranged, the long hair in disorder, the limbs lay anyhow. From the throat, dreadfully lacerated, had issued a pool of blood not yet entirely coagulated. The ribbon with which he had bound the wrists was broken; the hands were tightly clenched. Between the teeth was a fragment of the animal's ear.

### **SOLUTION TO THE APRIL "UNSOLVED":**

The host was killed by his brother's wife, Barbara.

# THE STORY THAT WON

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by Andre Kertesz



The December Mysterious Photograph contest (photo above) was won by B. I. Chance of Sublimity, Oregon. Honorable mentions go to Salvatore J. Stazzone of Woodhaven, New York; L. Barrigan Basker of Carmichael, California; Frank J. Prince of Greendale, Wisconsin; Colorado Butler of Collinston, Louisiana; Michael D. Donnelly of Carnegie, Pennsylvania; Linda Couture of Albuquerque, New Mexico; Diane Mitchell of Oakland, California; and Wendy Haskett of Cardiff, California.

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## THE SNATCH by B. I. Chance

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Mr. Van Pelt stopped in his tracks as the two men approached in a threatening manner. "Awright, move it, mister," one of them said. Undercover police, assigned to protect Van Pelt the diamond merchant, converged on the scene and whisked the two men to jail.

Captain Cook read the report. Willie Maket and Don Betonet, small-time hoods with records to match. He'd hoped for bigger fish.

Willie Maket sat in the interrogation room. "So, Willie," Captain Cook said, "You tried to pull a snatch. That's not your M.O. Who's behind this caper?" Willie's blank face stared back at him. Finally he said, "Well, Big Al gave us the tickets."

That's more like it, Cook thought. Big Al Morgan, kingpin in the rackets, had hired these two nobodies to snatch Ven Pelt and secrete him somewhere. With the two hoods shipped out of the country, he'd be free to rob or ransom the merchant with no evidence pointing to his involvement. Now to get this bird to sing.

"Tell us the whole story, Willie. Cooperate and it will go easier for you later. What was the plan?"

"Ain't much to tell. When we found we'd lost the tickets—"

"Forget the tickets, Willie. What was the PLAN?"

"The plan? Well, ah, I guess you'd say the plan was to get to the game before it was over. This dude had his foot on the tickets. I asked him to move it." Willie surveyed the stunned faces around the table. "I shoulda said 'please'?"



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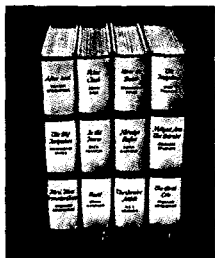
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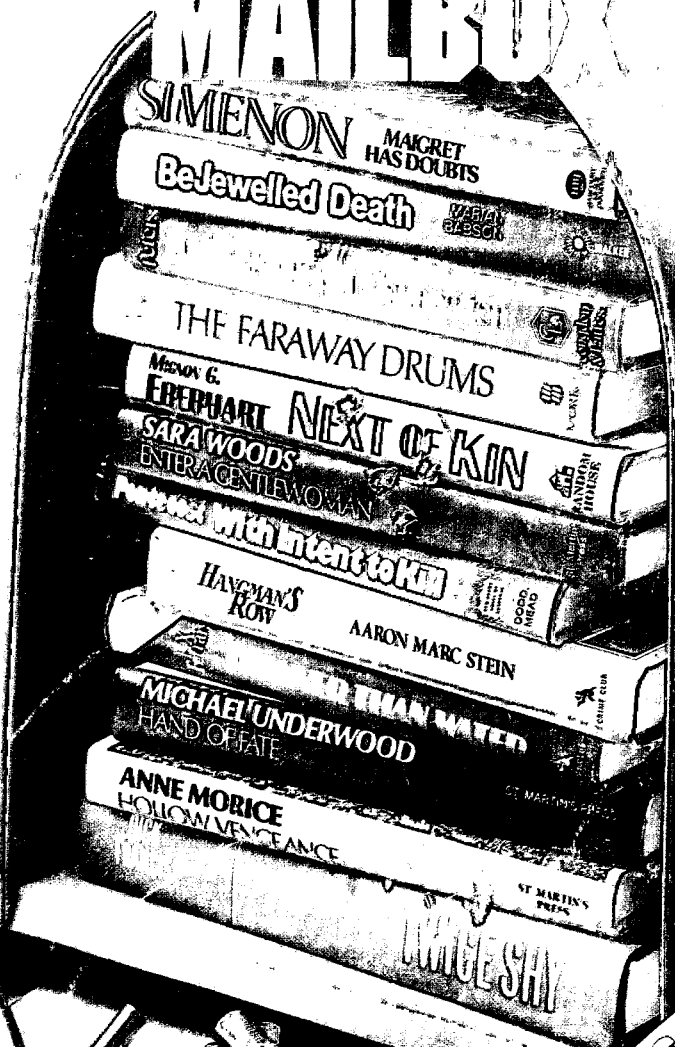
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